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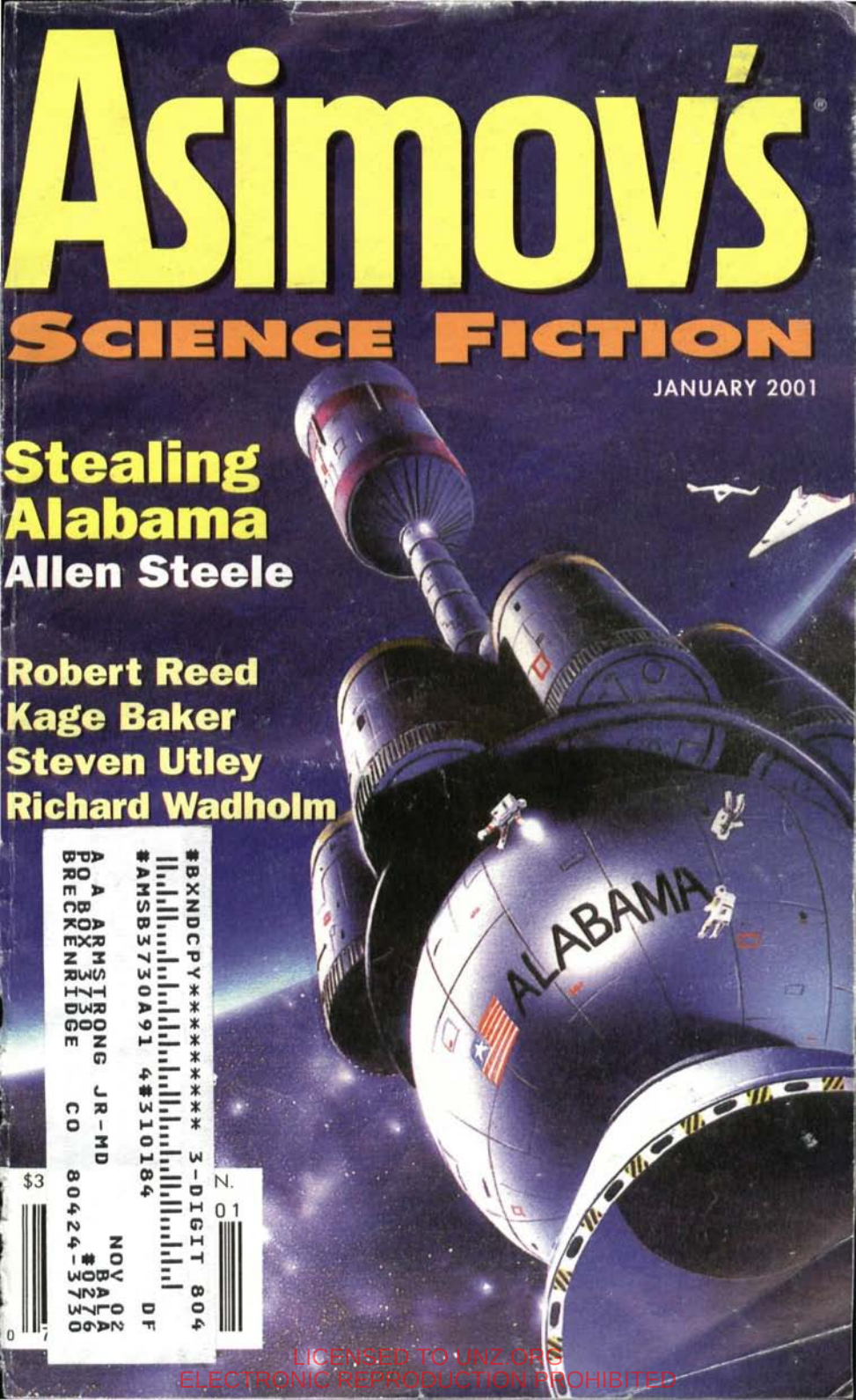

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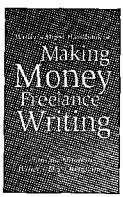

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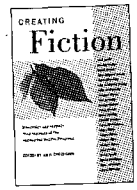

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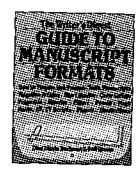

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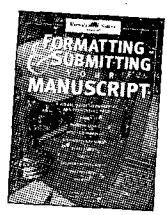

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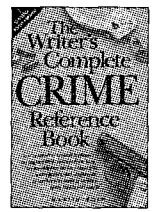

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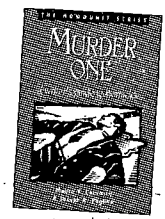

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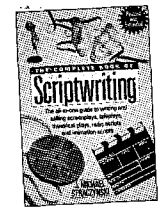

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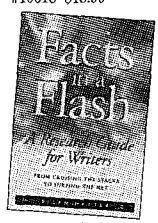

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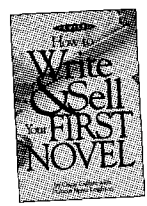

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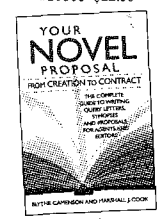

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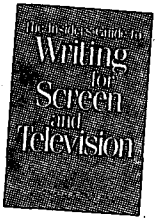

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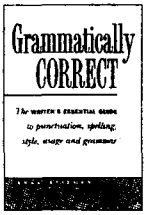

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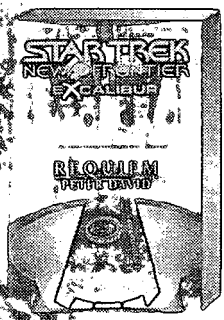

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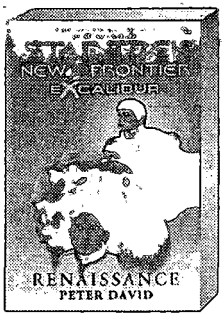

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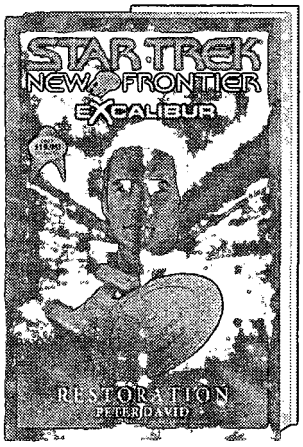

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE EVAPORATION OF REPUTATIONS

A couple of months ago the people at University of Nebraska Press invited me to write an introduction for a new edition of A. Merritt's 1919 novel *The Moon Pool,* which is going to be included in their new series of reissued fantasy and science fiction classics. These are very handsome paperbacks that are released under the university's Bison Books imprint. I had previously done an introduction for a Bison edition of Camille Flammarion's extraordinary nineteenth-century work, *Omega: The Last Days of the World,* and other books published so far in the same series include Jules Verne's *The Chase of the Golden Meteor* with an introduction by Gregory Benford and a collection of Jack London's short fantasies with an introduction by Philip José Farmer.

The interesting thing—the mystifying thing—is the inclusion of a Merritt novel in this list. Camille Flammarion's book was deservedly famous in its day, but its day was a very long time ago and the novel is known nowadays only to scholars. Many books by Jules Verne and Jack London are still widely read, of course; even so, I had never so much as heard of *The Chase of the Golden Meteor,* and if I were asked to name the titles of Jack London's short fantasy stories I would be able to get no farther than "The Scarlet Plague" and "The Shadow and the Flash."

Merritt, though? What was a book by *A. Merritt,* of all people, doing in a group of obscure fantasy classics being resurrected by a university press?

You, if you fall into the demographic majority of this magazine's readers, are at most fifty years old, very likely a good deal younger, and you are probably asking yourself a different question: "Who was A. Merritt, and what did he write?" But I'm of a different generation, and Merritt, whose eight fantasy novels were published between 1919 and 1934, was very big stuff indeed when I began reading science fiction and fantasy in the late 1940s.

His books were all over the newsstands in various paperback editions that never went out of print, and also were reprinted, again and again, in such pulp magazines of the period as *Fantastic Novels* and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries.* For a brief while in 1950 the publishers of those magazines even brought out an entire magazine that was devoted primarily to his work: *A. Merritt's Fantasy Magazine.*

It is no small thing for a writer of fiction to have a magazine named for him. By definition, it implies wide-ranging name-brand recognition. The very magazine you hold is just such a magazine, after all. In order to understand how astounded I am that the name and work of A. Merritt has been forgotten, here in the dawning year of the twenty-first century, try to imagine a time, fifty years hence, when no one knows who Isaac Asimov was, and his novels are being rediscovered by university presses, complete with scholarly introductions to place them in context!

Merritt, who lived from 1884 to 1943, was, as it happens, quite possibly the most popular fantasy

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writer of the first half of the twentieth century. In 1938 *Argosy,* the magazine in which most of Merritt's work had first been published, asked its readers to select the best story it had run in its fifty-eight years of existence. (I suppose nobody remembers *Argosy* now either. But it came out every week for decades, had an enormous readership, and paid the highest rates of any magazine for the material it ran. Its pages were filled with serialized novels by the likes of Edgar Rice Burroughs, John Buchan, Max Brand, Zane Grey, Luke Short, Erle Stanley Gardner, and George Allan England, and just about every other important writer of popular fiction of the time.) Merritt's *The Ship of Ishtar,* which *Argosy* had run twelve years earlier, finished at the top of the list of *Argosy* reader favorites, and was promptly reprinted as a six-part serial. The following year, also by popular demand, *Argosy* reprinted Merritt's *Seven Footprints to Satan,* a five-parter dating from 1927.

The outpouring of reader satisfaction after those two reprints led directly to the founding by the publisher of *Argosy* of the two all-fantasy magazines, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* (1939) and *Fantastic Novels* (1940). Both of them were given over entirely to reprinting fantasy novels from the parent magazine, with Merritt material in virtually every issue; indeed, the very first story in the first issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* was Merritt's original novella version of "The Moon Pool."

Fantasy fans gobbled it all up. They demanded more and more Merritt, which meant drawing on the same small pool of material, since Merritt had stopped writing in the mid-1930s and by 1943 was dead. An authoritative poll of SF and fantasy readers taken in 1944,

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and again in 1945 and 1946, named Merritt as the favorite novelist all three times, over such contemporaries as Robert A. Heinlein, A.E. van Vogt, L. Ron Hubbard, and E.E. Smith.

His vogue was still going strong when I discovered fantasy fiction about a decade later. The two reprint magazines were still recycling his stories, and late in 1949 they added a companion, the short-lived *A. Merritt's Fantasy Magazine*, which managed only five issues before sputtering out of existence when the advent of the Korean War sent the price of paper skyrocketing. The real problem with the magazine, though, was that Merritt's oft-reprinted stories had finally become too familiar to the magazine readers of the day to justify starting a third vehicle for them, and his eight novels and handful of short stories would not have kept the magazine going very long anyway. (The second issue, by the way, contains an effusive letter welcoming the new magazine by the fourteen-year-old Robert Silverberg.)

But the novels had moved by then into the primordial paperbacks of the era. Avon Books, whose fantasy editor was the shrewd and knowledgeable Donald A. Wollheim, slipped most of Merritt's novels, rather misleadingly, into a series of large-sized paperbacks it was putting out then under the general title of *Murder Mystery Monthly,* beginning in 1942 with *Seven Footprints to Satan.* The books were wildly successful, and after a few years Avon moved them into the standard paperback format, reissuing them from time to time, decade after decade, on into the 1980s. The later editions carried a banner declaring, "Over 5,000,000 copies of A. Merritt's Books Sold in Avon Editions."

Because I remembered how popular those Avon paperbacks had been, and had seen some new editions of them around in relatively modern times (1979, say), I had assumed that the current immense popularity of fantasy of all kinds would be keeping Merritt's books afloat very nicely. And so the Nebraska request took me by surprise. How, I wondered, had the university folks managed to get the rights to the hugely successful *The Moon Pool* away from Avon after all these years?

Well, it hadn't been hard at all. Amidst today's vast boom in the kind of fiction he pioneered, Merritt has somehow vanished into oblivion. Titles such as *The Ship of Ishtar, Dwellers in the Mirage,* and *The Face in the Abyss* stir no recognition among modern readers. The paperback company that sold millions of copies of his novels eventually allowed their publishing rights to lapse. And so it has fallen to a university press to restore to print *The Moon Pool,* once the best known of his books. Only eighty years ago a New York *Times* reviewer writing about that book said "it marks the debut of a writer possessed of a very unusual, perhaps one might call it extraordinary, richness of imagination. The author's energy and fertility of imaginative resource never seems to lessen."

But his reputation has. I wonder why.

One might argue that Merritt's storytelling hallmarks—his stock heroes and villains, his florid adjective-rich descriptive prose, his reliance on such by-now-familiar devices as hidden lost races, beautiful and evil high priestesses, dimensional gateways, and the like—are too old-fashioned for today's cynical readers. But in fact the modern commercial genre of fantasy is built on foundations that Merritt (and H.

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Rider Haggard) before him erected, and most of it makes use of the very same stuff, repackaged only slightly for contemporary tastes.

Nor is cynicism a factor in the conception of fantasy fiction today, anyway, so far as I can see. No narrative trope is too hackneyed for today's fantasists; we have not seen such an outpouring of robust bare-chested sword-swinging heroes, of scheming wizards and sorcerers, of cruel and lovely priestesses with daggers clenched between their teeth, since the heyday of the pulp magazines when Merritt was still at work three quarters of a century ago, and the constant presence of such work on best-seller lists testifies to its renewed popularity. The very clichés out of which innumerable fantasy trilogies are spun nowadays are clichés that Merritt *invented*.

And yet Merritt himself has been forgotten. I don't get it. Robert E. Howard's gaudy pulp fiction still finds scads of readers, sixty-odd years after his death. The same is true of the baroque work of H.P. Lovecraft, another icon of the 1930's. Howard and Lovecraft, I suppose, tap strange forces in the modern psyche that the less neurotic Merritt doesn't reach. For whatever reason, something has swallowed up Merritt's work. The complete evaporation of his literary reputation not only astounds me; it calls to my mind the image of a world a generation or two hence in which not only the novels of Robert Silverberg have been forgotten—I could live with that, posthumously, at least—but also those of Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Roger Zelazny, Poul Anderson, and just about anyone else whose name you would like to add. If it can happen to Merritt, it can happen to anyone. That's a chilly prospect indeed. O

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

CYBERPUNK

Moved

Once upon a time, I was a cyberpunk. Well, sort of. Something like. I guess maybe you had to be there.

The problem with artistic movements is that they tend to break up almost as soon as they are discovered. It's easy for a group of like-minded painters or poets or science fiction writers to exchange theories, flattery, condolences, cheap ethanol, and sexual favors while they're young, struggling artists. It's not so easy to maintain ideological rigor and group identity once a *Movement* has been anointed. As soon as members acquire book contracts and mortgages and kids and ex-spouses, keeping them together is like herding cats.

So it was with the cyberpunks. In the beginning, the core cyberpunks, William Gibson, **Rudy Rucker** *<http://www.mathcs.sjsu.edu/faculty/rucker/>*, **Lewis Shiner** *<http://members.aol.com/maryklew/lsdotcom.html>*, **John Shirley** *<http://www.darkecho.com/JohnShirley/>* and **Bruce Sterling** *<http://lonestar.texas.net/~dub/sterling.html>* were writing buddies with compatible, if not necessarily similar, sensibilities. (Interestingly enough, while **William Gibson** does not appear to have an official website, he is the only cyberpunk to have his own web ring at *<http://www.loibnegger.com/neuromancer/>*). As they struggled to sell their stories, the cyberpunks decided to cast themselves as literary rebels out to topple a right-wing and decadent SF establishment. To announce their revolution, they published **Cheap Truth** *<http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/~erich/cheaptruth/>*, a little broadside with all the charm of barbed wire. The *Cheap Truth* archives still smolder with an almost toxic ambition for the goals of the Movement, as the cyberpunks liked to call themselves. As I revisit them now, these screeds read like hyperbolic satire, but in the early eighties, they drew blood. If not exactly dangerous, the cyberpunks were flamboyantly reckless, shouting defiance at an *Us v. Them* universe. Here's a 1984 review of Gardner Dozois's *First Annual The Year's Best Science Fiction*, referring to the accomplishments of "the eighties' generation," written by one Vincent Omniaveritas, the pseudonymous perp of *Cheap Truth*:

> *If these heirs-designate were dropped into a strong magnetic field, Gibson, Shiner, Sterling, Cadigan and Bear would immediately drift to one pole. Swanwick, Robinson, Kessel, Kelly, Murphy and Willis would take the other.*

Although I was certainly flattered by the company *Cheap Truth* had put me in, I thought its rhetoric could use degaussing, so I committed a few cyberpunk stories just to prove I could. *Take that, Vince!* Among them was "Solstice," which appeared in these

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pages in June of 1985. Meanwhile, Bruce Sterling was of a mind to document the accomplishments of cyberpunk in a reprint anthology. He approached **David Hartwell** <*http://www.panix.com/~dgh/*>, one of the field's best editors and secret masters, with a proposal for a collection of the Movement's greatest hits, to be called *Mirrorshades*. David writes,

> *As I recall, he had six writers (two of them collaborators of the original four) and I said that there had to be twelve to make a movement, or words to that effect. He said it would be no problem to include twelve, and so he surprised people such as James Patrick Kelly, Greg Bear, and Paul DiFilippo by making them part of the Movement and including them in* Mirrorshades.

Of course, I was thrilled to have "Solstice" in such an important book. To change my literary image, I spent hours in front of the mirror with my shades on, working on a world-weary sneer. But no sooner did *Mirrorshades* come out than Vincent Omniaveritas killed *Cheap Truth*. "I hereby declare the revolution over," he wrote in the last issue. "Long live the provisional government." Many of the original cyberpunks declared the Movement was now history. Some renounced it, or at least spoke slightingly of "the c-word." Revisionists claimed that there never really had been any Movement at all and that William Gibson was the only true cyberpunk. Indeed, in his first flush of fame and fortune, William Gibson himself seemed much larger than any obscure sci-fi Movement.

Life Imitates Art

But then something strange happened. There was some careless handling of hazardous cyberpunk materials and liquid sense of wonder sloshed out of its science fiction containment. The spill of *Neuromancer* alone coated imaginations from Bayonne to Berkeley. William Gibson became an icon of popular culture. He put a cheesy SF neologism, *cyberspace*, into the freaking Oxford English Dictionary! You see, the beauty of this cyberpunk stuff was that it was the first kind of science fiction you could actually live. Nobody in his right mind expected to crew on the Starship Enterprise or jaunt back to the Jurassic, but for a thousand bucks or so you could stick your head through the screen of a PC and breath 100 percent pure cyberspace. And it just kept getting bigger and better and stranger every minute, like the mother of all acid trips. Indeed, **Timothy Leary** <*http://www.leary.com/*> declared cyberspace the LSD of the eighties and formed alliances with some of the cyberpunks. A cyberpunk subculture exploded into **hackers and crackers** <*http://www.2600.com*> and **cypherpunks** <*ftp://ftp.csua.berkeley.edu/pub/cypherpunks/Home.html*> and **otakus** <*http://www.eff.org/pub/Net_culture/Cyberpunk/otaku.article*> and **ravers** <*http://www.hyperreal.org/*> and **transhumans** <*http://www.transhuman.org/*> and **extropians** <*http://www.extropy.com/*> and **zippies** <*http://www.altculture.com/.index/aentries/z/zippies.html*>, to name but a few. This is not to say all of these groups consciously trace their cultural ancestry back to science fiction's cyberpunks—although many of them do. But the hardware we were extrapolating in the eighties is starting to turn up in the *Fetish* column of **Wired** <*http://www.wired.com*>, which has become something like the *Popular Science* of cyberpunk. And some of those who helped create the net as we know it have ac-

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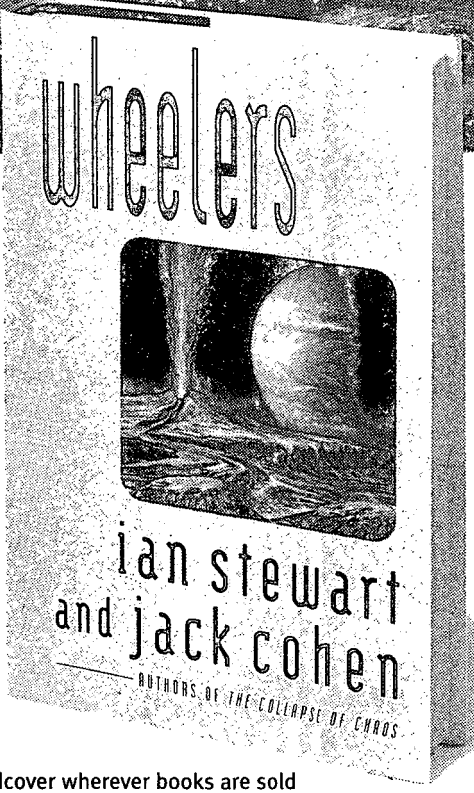

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knowledged that they reverse engineered it from William Gibson' conception of cyberspace.

For a field guide to the real world cyberpunks and their siblings, try **alt.culture** <*http://www.altculture.com*>, an encyclopedia of Nineties' youth culture. You can find more in-depth analysis at the excellent net culture archives of the **Electronic Freedom Foundation** <*http://www.eff.org/*>. Perhaps the most comprehensive cyberpunk site on the web is something called The Cyberpunk Project. Unfortunately I cannot recommend it to you because, as I write this, it features not only pirated articles but entire novels by some of the core cyberpunks, posted without permission. I know, I know—pirating data would seem to be a cyberpunk thing to do. But that's always been a contradiction of cyberpunk; it's a literature with an outlaw attitude that is nonetheless a captive of its bourgeois infrastructure.

Commodification

Of course, since nobody really owns the word *cyberpunk*, people feel free to bend it to their own purposes. Take for example, **Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0** <*http://www.talsorian.com/cpindex.shtml*> which is "The original role-playing game of the dark future; a world of corporate assassins, heavy-metal heroes, and brain-burning cyberhackers, packed with cutting-edge technology and intense urban action." For a mere $599, **Cyberpunk studios** <*http://www.cyberpunk.ws*> will design your website. "Our website packages provide you with a starting point for your Internet identity." Turnkey web packages for the Celebrity/Model/Actor are a specialty. CyberPunk Software will sell you **Virtual Woman 2000** <*http://www.virtualwoman.net/*>, an infinitely customizable cartoon babe with a limited AI that can parse your best pick-up lines. Say just the right words and VW2000 will disrobe for your viewing pleasure. **Cyberpunk Services for the Internet** <*http://www.cyberpunk.net/*> provides "leading edge networking, hosting, programming, and consulting services and transaction processing systems for the demanding needs of the business community."

Although not commercial site, **CybRpunk** <*http://gearheads.wirewd.com/cybrpunk/*> attempts to pass ownership of cyberpunk literature to the masses by explaining the formula for those who aspire to write the stuff. ". . . once you have the rudiments of speculative fiction down, cyberpunk will be easy for you." All the familiar tropes are here for the taking: the subcultures, "Drug Culture is going to figure big," the settings, "The USA is broken up into city-states, ruled by corporate dictators," the hardware, "Personal tanks will be popular," and the wetware, "Neural jacks are possible, but difficult." Webmasters Ken "Wirehead" Wronkiewicz and Marshall Motley have made a neat and thorough dissection of classic cyberpunk here; unfortunately, what they have left us with is a corpse. For by codifying the cyberpunk formula, they have stripped it of its ability to surprise. And that, for me at least, was one of its chief attractions.

The cyberpunks were no revolutionaries; instead what they accomplished was much-needed reform. There was a staleness to SF in the late seventies; the genre as a whole was thinking very hard about old news. The cyberpunks pointed me and lots of other writers at some troubling issues and bleeding edge technology; I was a better writer for it. Yes, their attitude was a bit hard to take at times, but it was fresh in every sense of the word.

Nevermore, alas.

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The edge

Of course, people have been claiming that cyberpunk is finished, played out, obsolete, hopelessly compromised and therefore irrelevant—not to mention stone cold dead—ever since our own Gardner Dozois hung the "c-word" on the Movement. And still it persists. Let me point you toward a couple of excellent sites that, while they do not sport mirrorshades, nevertheless share cyberpunk's take-no-prisoners approach to extrapolation.

Several years ago, late one night at a party at some science fiction convention or other, I found myself talking trends in the field with David Hartwell and a bunch of other writers. David opined that we needed to rethink robots and made a persuasive case that there was much new territory for us to explore. I think that he is right and that there is no better guide to this territory than **Hans Moravec** <*http://www.frc.ri.cmu.edu/~hpm/*>. Moravec is Principal Research Scientist at the Robotics Institute of Carnegie-Mellon University. He is also a visionary. I confess that I cribbed ideas like crazy from Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988) for my last novel. His latest book, *Robot, Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1999) is essential reading for anyone who aspires to think seriously about the future. If you can't raise the sixteen bucks to buy the trade paper, a close reading of his website will do almost as well. He has been extraordinarily generous here, putting not only much of his scholarly work online but also many wonderful articles slanted to the general audience as well.

Cyberpunk's great polemicist, Bruce Sterling, has grown up some, raised a lovely family, built a big house and written some of the best and most important science fiction of the late twentieth century. So what does he do for an encore? Just try to save the world by designing a new art movement, **The Viridians** <*http://www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades/viridian*>. The Viridian Movement, of which Bruce has proclaimed himself "absolute monarch," is his attempt to bring an aesthetic to bear on one of the most alarming environmental problems humanity has ever faced: global warming and the Greenhouse Effect. I am not going to try to summarize the sprawl of Bruce's Viridian thinking, which at first blush seems quirky and quixotic but which upon reflection proves to be not only relentlessly intelligent but profoundly moral. Go to the site with an open mind and spend some time in the archives and, if you see the sense in the Viridian Movement, sign up for the listserv to receive regular Viridian Notes.

Exit

Was I ever really a cyberpunk? And if I was, when did I stop being one? Many writers find it helpful to write to an audience and there was a time when I addressed some stories to the cyberpunks. Science fiction, like other kinds of creative writing, often takes on the attributes of a dialog—or perhaps argument is the more descriptive word in this case. Once I thought I had made my point, I moved on. However, if I was never really part of the Movement, I can certainly say that cyberpunk left its mark on me. It made me a more adventurous researcher and a more rigorous extrapolator. You know, it may be just a coincidence, but as I glance back over my bibliography, I think it was about the time that the cyberpunks were in full cry that I relaxed and started having fun writing.

And I still have my mirrorshades. ○

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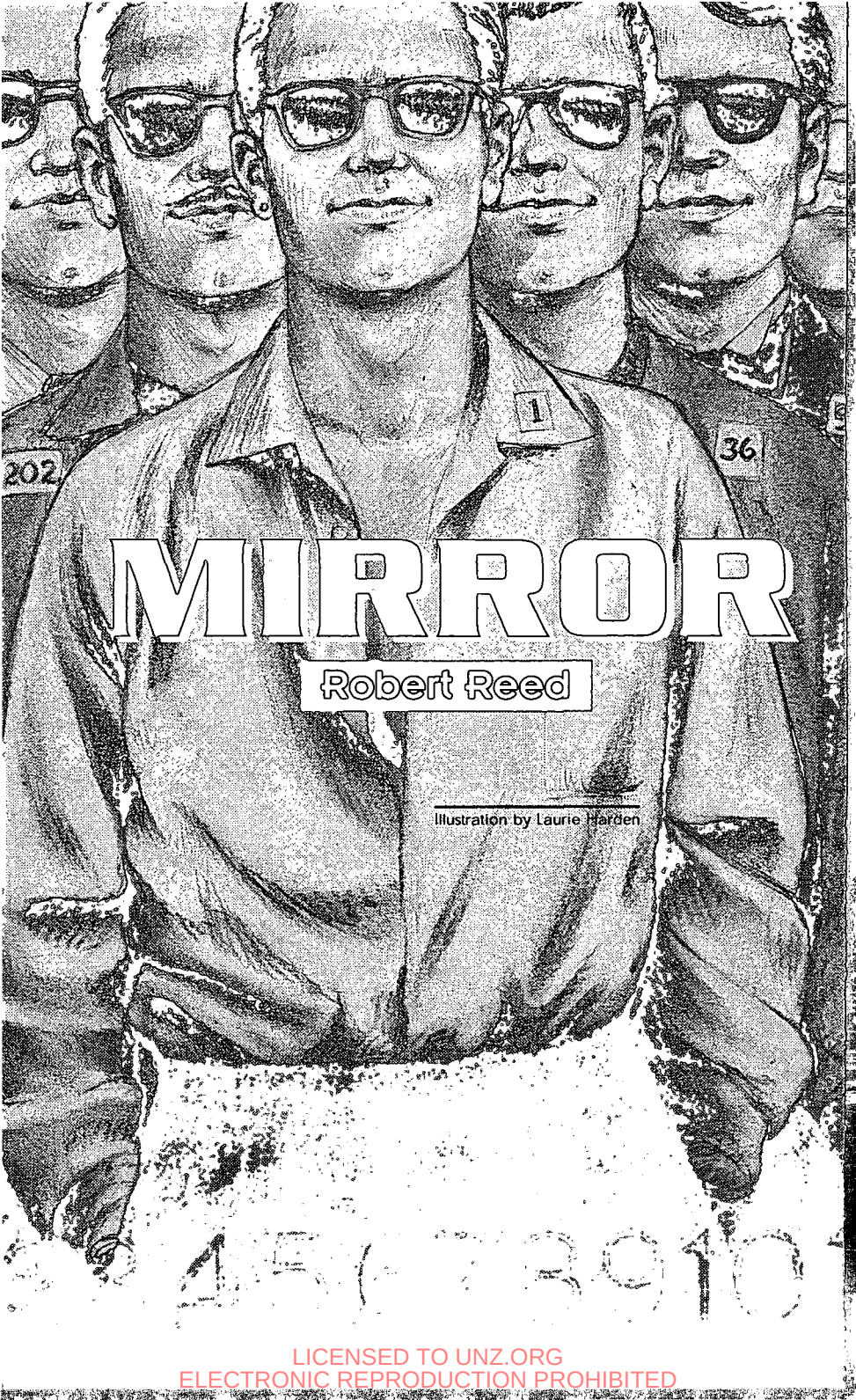

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Robert Reed tells us "I must be reaching that reflective time of life—in other words, I'm looking back over my shoulder as much as I'm peering ahead. In the 'many worlds' version of the universe, all success seems instructively small." Those pensive thoughts have led to a brilliant and evocative new story. Mr. Reed's most recent accomplishments include a World Fantasy Award nomination for "Human Bay" (*Asimov's*, May 1999).

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It seems like a great day, and I can tell you exactly why. This girl gives me a little look. I'm doing lunch at the new restaurant off Market Square; a couple buddies from the office are with me, helping me try it out. Our waitress strolls past with the menus and says that her name is Heather and she'll be our server today, and that's when she gives it to me. The look. Then comes what may or may not be a flirtatious little wink. Both of which I might discount on a normal day, except after she leaves, my buddies start giggling, saying, "Leave my fucking daughter alone, Ross," and that sort of amiable bullshit.

The girl is twenty, maybe. Skinny and tall and not quite pretty. But she's young, perfectly and wondrously young, and I'm a kid again. By the end of lunch, I've flirted for a grand total of ninety seconds, and that brings the kind of happiness that can carry this old soul through a brutal afternoon of meetings. The commute home gives me time to imagine my new life with Heather. We'll share a big studio apartment above the restaurant, and when she's home, she'll wear nothing but her apron and name tag, and we'll have a wide drawer filled with brightly colored sex toys, and sometimes she'll bring home one of her college girlfriends, which is when the real fun happens.

It's a daydream, nothing more.

Honestly, I can't remember the girl's eyes, and the body in my mind is probably more interesting than the real item. But it's all fun enough to give me a little woody that lasts right up until I pull in at home and let myself in the garage door.

Pauline's on the phone. Judging by her bouncy tone, she's talking to her sister. Leo is sprawled out on the couch, pretending to study. Then he pretends to look at me. But his eyes never quite point high enough, and then they drift back to the television again. I mean to say something to him—something fatherly and smart—but then his mother says, "Bye, Beck," and comes into view, the phone still clasped in her hand and this strange wide smile causing me to freeze up.

She's a beautiful woman. Now, and when she was twenty. And always.

I can't feel anything but ashamed, looking at those cheekbones and the blonde hair and the leggy body that she keeps in mint condition. I'm a shit, and I'm an idiot. That's what I'm thinking when she says to me, "Somebody's getting a mirror."

It takes me a half-moment to clear my head. "A mirror?" I sputter.

"The new kind of mirror," she says, her smile more than a smile. "He's a local man. And you know him."

I know a lot of people.

"Guess who?" she prompts.

But I don't have to guess. Really, in this universe, there's only one person who it could even remotely be.

I won't pretend to understand mirrors. And that's from someone who halfway liked science during his school days. For me, the problem is that quantum mechanics is magical crap, what with light acting as if it's a particle and electrons being everywhere at once. Which is how the mirrors work, they tell me. Someone learned that the universe is just one of an infinite number of overlapping universes, and every electron shares its existence with a trillion different places, and if you have enough cleverness and energy, plus billions of dollars, you can build a machine that reaches from your little realm into countless others.

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It's called a mirror because of its appearance, which is thin and perfectly reflective. And because of how the bastard works.

A person stands in front of his mirror. He sees his own reflection, which the mirror sees the unique pattern of his molecules. That's important. Critical, even. To navigate across the vast, hidden dimensions of the hyperverse, one needs a specific target. The target has to be large and complex and extraordinarily unlikely. A fleck of dust isn't any of those things. A block of limestone isn't much better. Even a famous sculpture—some beautiful nude carved from the finest, rarest marble—doesn't have the necessary intricacies. But the human body is a marvel of improbabilities thrown on top of improbabilities. Sixty trillion cells, each stuffed with the same DNA. That's what the mirror sees. Then it reaches out through the hyperverse, hunting for identical patterns, and if someone happens to be standing in front of their brother-mirror, a link is created. The person sees an image very much like his own. But the image isn't dressed in quite the same way, and maybe its face shows little differences. A unique scar. An odd part to the hair. The little peculiarities that come from two lives that are very much the same, except for the details.

And here's the kicker:

A mirror isn't just a mirror.

If you can send light from one universe to another, you can do the same with flesh and bone. It only requires a huge pulse of energy, plus some slightly more sophisticated machinery. The mirror acts as a passageway too, and it's like using a door. Take a long step forward, endure a momentary tingle and chill, and you'll find yourself standing in a place very much like your own.

Except in the details, that is.

I'm in bed. And Pauline is promising to join me. But she's religious about her stretching, and honestly, I normally don't mind. Forty years old, and she can still lay the palms of her hands flat to the floor, her long legs nearly straight, the tallest thing about her being her firm and strong and virtually naked ass.

But tonight I'm watching television instead of my wife. The local news is still chewing on this amazing business. Joel Montgomery this, Joel Montgomery that. In case anyone can forget, the reporters keep listing his assets. Joel bought his first stock as a teenager. He acquired his first company before he was twenty-one, and he was a genuine billionaire before he was thirty. A single share of Montgomery stock began life at two dollars. Now that same share is worth a new Lexus. If I'd bought ten shares at the beginning, and if the next two decades repeat the last two . . . well, Pauline and I could buy pretty much any island nation of our choice, then retire into despotic luxury.

And the thing is, it could have happened.

Easily.

I was in the high school cafeteria, eating the mystery meat, and Joel sat down opposite me, completely uninvited. He showed me his special smile, then asked, "How about it, Ross? Give me a little capital, and let me make something out of it."

I could have said, "No," for a hundred good reasons.

But I only needed one reason to refuse him. Flat out, I told him, "I don't like you very much, and we both know why, and starting now, why don't you leave me alone?"

Twenty-plus years ago, and I still remember my words. For about the mil-

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lionth time, I have to ask myself, "What if. . . ?" Which just makes me shiver and shake my head, and to save my soul, I glance at my wife's ass.

"It is the only operating mirror in private hands," the television explains. "Mr. Montgomery will be using it to bring alternates of himself to our fair city. There will be a month of special events, culminating with a festival on his, and their, birthday."

"The arrogant prick," I blurt. "That self-obsessed shit."

Pauline settles next to me, stealing the remote and killing the television. Then she has to tell me, "It really bothers you."

As if I don't know my own mind.

"He's done enormous things for this town," she reminds me.

What I'm thinking, I don't say. Instead, I let the bedroom get quiet. Then I quietly inform her, "I don't want to talk about Joel Montgomery anymore."

We haven't been talking about much tonight. Considering.

Pauline is also having thoughts that she won't express. Twenty years of marriage, and that's just something I know. But then she gets up and makes sure that the bedroom door is locked, which is something that I don't see much anymore, and walking back to bed, she does a damn good job of looking straight at me.

Naturally, the big topics at work are the festival and mirrors. The guy who's our self-appointed expert on everything says, with authority, that Joel has already locked up the available rooms at the best hotels. That's how he refers to our billionaire neighbor. "Joel." Everyone does that. This is a town of a quarter of a million Midwesterners, and if you're middle-class and local, you've likely met the man. You went to school with him. Or he once dated your sister or cousin or mother. Or you were invited to some big charity dinner where he was honored with a walnut plaque and a round of applause. Joel's probably shaken a quarter of the hands in town, and he's used a lot of people's first names. Without question, he's good with people. Smooth and sophisticated, and irresistibly charming. He can make you believe that you're his new best friend, even if he's just reading your name off a paper tag. Which is a very small reason to like anybody. But if you discount his money and his power and his local roots, then you can see the main reason why people around here pretty much adore our little Joel.

Hell, even I've come to accept and respect my old high school classmate. And despite calling him a self-obsessed prick, I'm genuinely curious about his festival. Interested, even. Very nearly intrigued.

Instead of lunch, I slip over to the health club. Instead of grease and salt, I eat twenty minutes of treadmill and a round on the weight machines. Every television in the long room is turned to the news, thirty or forty images of our Joel talking about his plans. The scientists who keep track of these things claim there's ten trillion trillion universes within touching distance, each one slightly different than our own. And in those touchable universes, mirrors are always a new technology, and expensive, and held in the hands of the fortunate few. Which means that our Joel is going to find Joels like himself. Rich ones. They're guessing that thirty or forty of them will visit, which isn't too strange. And then I picture them in a parade through downtown, each sitting in the back of a red convertible, waving to the cameras and their cheering admirers . . . and it just seems so preposterous and harmless, and fun, that I actually start to laugh in the middle of my abdominals, feeling weak and relieved, and perfectly happy.

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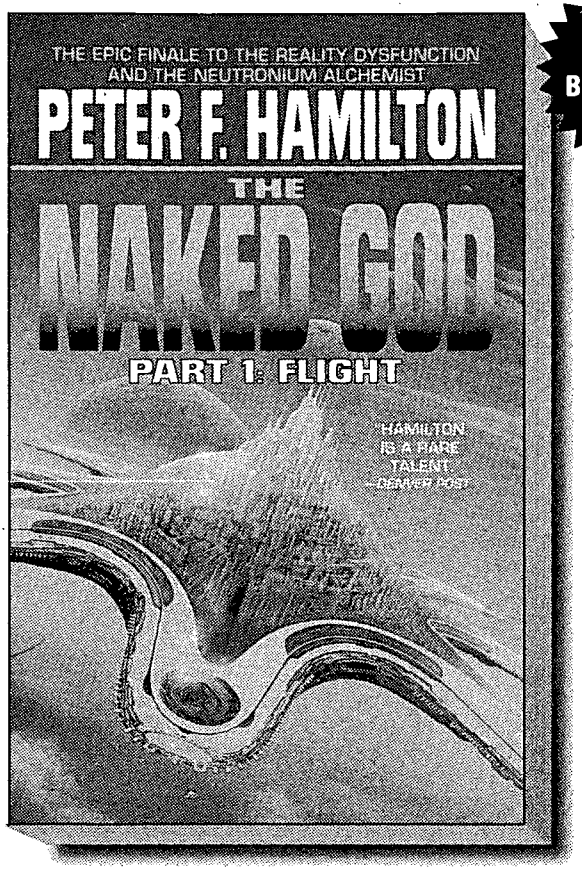
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My happiness lasts ten minutes.

I'm dressing after a quick scalding shower, and two young guys are talking in the adjacent aisle.

"What would you do if you had your own?" one fellow asks his buddy. Then he answers his own question, saying, "I'd trade places with my twin. In a heartbeat."

"Yeah, and do *what?*"

"Try his life out."

"Try his wife out?"

"No, I said. . . ." Then the first guy is laughing. "Yeah, that's what I said. Every night, I'd do a different wife!"

And now I'm dressing in a dead-sprint, not even bothering to dry my hair.

Joel ran track in high school. It's not something that I think about much, but it comes back to me when I hear the plan: To keep the Joels straight, they're going to wear numbers like the runners in a road race. Our Joel is One. The rest will be named according to the order in which they come out of the mirror. Their numbers won't be painted on stiff white paper. This will be a class operation, I keep hearing. Each number will be small and neatly stitched into square patches of good wool, and they'll be able to fasten their numbers to any garment and look appropriate.

With her height and strength, Pauline was the star on the volleyball team. Our school had an annual sports banquet, and I was thinking about asking her to be my date. But Joel was first out of the gate, and she told him, "Yes." So I ended up going with my father. The speaker was a retired Packer who talked about the good things that "atheletics" had done for him—throwing in that extra E, giving the word a weight and false pretense. I was a football player, second-string tight end and special teams. And except for the odd way that our speaker said athletics, I can't remember a thing about him. What I *do* remember was watching Joel and Pauline, one of them talking constantly while the other one laughed a little too much, particularly if all she wanted was to pretend to be polite.

I'm home before my wife.

Leo's camped out in front of the television, watching some slasher film that he's probably seen a thousand times. He doesn't even look at me, but with a tight little voice, he says, "A guy called."

"What guy?"

"For Mom," he tells me. "Just a couple minutes ago."

Again, I ask the important question. "What guy?"

Now his eyes find me. Our son has his mother's looks and his father's nervous worries, although he does a fair job of hiding both. He's going to be fifteen soon. It's the worst age, particularly if you end up with any sort of life to compare with it. That's what I'm always reminding myself. In secret.

Leo reports, "He didn't exactly give his name."

"So what did he say?"

"'Tell your mother hello for me,' he said. 'Tell her Number Nine called.'"

The phone doesn't ring again. Dinner is ordinary, and the sitcoms are ordinary, and if I didn't know this family, I'd think they were a happy but quiet bunch.

In bed, with the door closed but not locked, it's safe to mention the obvious.

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"I'm worried," I admit.

Pauline says, "Don't be," right away. Flat out.

But it's never that easy for me. I shake my head, telling her, "I keep thinking. Maybe we should take a vacation. A big trip."

"For the next month, maybe?"

"Maybe."

She stares at me. Just stares.

"What?" I ask. "You've been after me to take you on a long cruise."

"Leo has school."

"Leo can stay with your folks. Or mine."

Pauline is sitting up in bed, staring at her own lap. After a moment, she asks, "Do you know what you're afraid of?"

"No, I don't," I admit. "And I don't want to find out, either."

She looks ready to say something. Whatever it is, it will be flat and honest, and unsparing, and that's exactly what I want. Twenty years of marriage has taught me that my wife has strengths where I'm weakest, and I don't have too much pride to refuse the occasional moment when she takes me under her wing.

But as her mouth opens, her expression changes.

"Do you hear a car?" she asks.

I do, yes. I turn off the lamp, and together, we slink over to the streetside window, peeking through the blinds. Not one car, but two, have stopped along the curb in front of our house. Limousines, one black and the other bone-white. Each has a passenger window rolled down. Each window frames the same silhouette of a head, the narrow chin and mouth visible beneath the wide and proud and important brain, and I can almost feel those perfectly matched eyes staring back at us.

The last time I spoke to Joel—our Joel—was in the waning moments of a local charity dinner. It was a couple of years ago. He had just received a special, recently invented award, and, in return, he pulled a million dollars from petty cash, giving it to abused children. Which was perfectly fine with me. Sure, it's easy to be cynical about a rich man's motives, but when I imagine having billions, I can't do any better than he does. Hard-luck kids, and hospitals, and the local schools. Those are just a few of his causes, and we're lucky to have him.

Anyway, I had a few words with our Joel.

A dozen or so well-dressed souls were holding coffee and drinks, basking in his wisdom. Joel was dressed in a tux and drinking nothing. He looked relaxed enough to take a nap, his smooth confident voice pouring out advice about artificial intelligence, fusion reactors, and other high-technologies sure to become critical soon. If there was any mention about the mirrors, I didn't hear it. But then again, I was hanging at the back of the pack, feeling smug about my indifference. Someone jokingly asked our distinguished guest about the Super Bowl. Since he was in the business of predicting the future and all, who'd win? And with a seamless ease, Joel said, "Ross Kaline."

Honestly, it was a little bit marvelous to hear my name coming from his famous mouth. I stepped closer, muttering, "Yeah. . . ?"

"Ross knows football. I don't." Joel laughed at his ignorance, which made everyone feel more at ease. Then he offered his hand to me. "How are you, Ross? It's been a few years, hasn't it?"

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"A few," I managed.

One of Joel's gifts is the ability to smoothly and instantly change his focus. Suddenly there wasn't any audience. There was just an old classmate from high school. "How are you doing? Still in insurance?"

"Still," I said.

"And Pauline—?"

"Fine. She's fine."

But that wasn't what he was asking. I knew it from his amused smirk, from his smiling green eyes. Then he completed his question, asking, "Is she with you tonight?"

"No."

"I didn't think I saw her."

I ignored the implications, nodding and telling him, "Our son's sick. She's home with him."

"Leo." That he knew our son's name wasn't too incredible. The man has a nearly perfect memory, and for as long as I've known him, he's loved to show it off. "Well," Joel purred, taking my hand again and giving it a good warm shake. "It was great seeing you again. Take care, Ross."

Then he was gone. Neatly and smoothly, he had slipped away, and I was left to wonder what anything meant. Did he care about my family? About me, or Pauline? Or did Joel just see me as an easy way to escape from a herd of worshippers? Because that's what they were. A herd. A few of them descended on me, and a youngish woman with a low-cut gown pushed close, asking, "What about the Super Bowl? Who's going to win it?"

I was the second-string tight end on a team that won exactly two games during my senior season. But the woman was pretty in her own way, and her ample breasts were trying to lift themselves into my eyes. So of course I put on a knowledgeable expression, telling her, "Cleveland."

Hell, I had somewhere around a fifty-fifty chance of being right. And all things considered, those are wickedly good odds.

There's only one topic at work today. And according to the latest count, that topic has at least fifty heads by now.

Even our top dog takes time to report the latest. Stan is a silver-haired gentleman with a young second wife, and to keep her happily busy, he gives her an allowance to help fuel a catering business. "Mindy's throwing a party at the mansion tonight," Stan reports with pride. "She's supposed to serve two hundred, but that includes dates and dignitaries and selected members of the press. People other than the Joels, I mean."

Stan is almost sixty, and in the local insurance game, he is a legend. A virtual god. He has the good looks of a man who is comfortable with cosmetic surgery, and he actually sees Joel Number One on a semi-regular basis. That's why I can almost believe it when Stan says, "A new one's coming through every hour now."

"Really?" someone blurts. "Our Joel just stands there, waiting?"

Stan shakes his head. "No. Apparently the new Joel takes the place of the one before him. If he decides to stay, that is. Quite a few don't, Mindy says. But if he does decide to stay here, the new Joel has to stand alone in the mirror room, showing himself off to the hyperverse. Which isn't exactly a brutal duty, since the servants bring him food and refreshments, and he's busy interviewing the house AI, learning everything he can about our little Earth."

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Everyone is fascinated and pleasantly appalled. This is an incredible and indulgent business, corrupt in some fiercely new way. Of course we want to know all about the decadent party. But Stan shows up late to work that next morning, leaving us to stew. The obvious excuse is that his wife found him a last-minute invitation. But it's almost eleven o'clock when our leader finally shuffles off the elevator. Stan's turned into a very old man. He hasn't slept, and his eyes are a miserable red, and he conspicuously avoids everyone's gaze. Yet there's at least one of us who can't read the signs. The idiot walks straight up to him, asking, "So how did things go out at the mansion? Did Mindy have a good time?"

Stan looks seventy this morning. But he's got a young man's swing, dropping the fool with a surgical right to the chin.

We started dating the summer after we'd graduated from high school. I'd had experiences with other girls, and Pauline pretended to be naive, which helped. I could almost believe that I was the first and only. For me, it was a great summer and a good freshman year, both of us attending the city college, talking a lot about getting married soon.

Pauline was doing most of the talking. And when she noticed that I was mostly quiet, she accused me of not being committed to the relationship.

What could I say? I told her, "I'm committed."

She gave a special look, then asked, "Do you want to marry me, or not?"

"Someday. Yeah."

Not the best two words of my life. And the next thing I knew, she was giving me back the opal and making noise about being just friends, implying the kind of friendship where you never spend time together. At least that's the message I was hearing. What she wanted was a proposal, and I wouldn't do that. I was too stubborn and too young, and I could do better. That's what I thought. And to that end, I went out on a string of dates with any girl who'd say yes, and I slept with the girls who said yes, and six months had passed, and that's when Joel wandered back to town.

He was supposed to be at Stanford, enjoying a full-ride scholarship. But it was October, and he was at the mall, buying a new winter coat at Eddie Bauer. I happened to be in there looking for summer shirts on sale. It was dumb luck that put us together. "Hey, Ross," he said, giving my hand a good shake.

I said, "What are you doing here?" Then because I didn't think it was possible, I asked, "Did you flunk out of Stanford?"

Without blinking, Joel said, "Exactly."

I didn't believe him.

He said, "I got way too busy with other projects. Investments, and this corporation that I'm forming." He didn't mention his long-ago offer to turn my little pile of cash into a fortune; he didn't have to dredge up that old news. "I'm planning to acquire some little high-tech companies and put them together. Companies that don't think they have anything in common. But they do. Or at least, they will."

I said, "Good luck." Because that's what you're supposed to say in the face of someone's success. "I'm sure you'll do big things."

But how big could things be? I was asking myself.

Then Joel gave me a different look. He appeared smug and self-satisfied, or maybe that's the expression I wanted to see. Maybe it's a memory that I added days later when I happened to run into Pauline's sister, and she

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thought to mention to me, with a pointed little voice, "Guess who's dating your old girlfriend again?"

Honestly, I've never liked that bitch.

It's a couple days later. I hit the club after work, feeling comfortably exhausted after the weights and running, stepping out onto the sidewalk just as a huge white limousine passes by. It has out-of-state plates, which isn't surprising. We're a small city with a modest population, and I mean modest in every sense of the word. If you want a fleet of limousines, you've got to hire them from elsewhere. And by now, there are so many of these monstrosities that it's not all that remarkable to see one or two bulling their way through traffic.

This limousine is sliding past, then stops abruptly.

A back window slides down with a hum, and a very familiar voice says, "Ross," with a fondness, or amusement. I can't tell which. Then the voice says, "Come over here," but it doesn't sound exactly like the first voice.

I have a choice. I feel strange and a little sick, but I'm also intensely curious. That's why I make my choice to step off the curb and risk the traffic, bending to look into the smoked-glass gloom of the car's interior.

I count five Joels.

No, six.

Six men who are each other's twin are sitting on the facing seats, each wearing polo shirts and cotton slacks and a shaved face and hair that goes from a little short to a little long. It's the simple hair that a busy man won't have to worry about. And to keep track of who's who, each man wears a different number fixed to his shirt, always set above his happy heart.

They say, "Ross," in the same breath.

Things have moved way past strange here.

All of them start to talk, then stop instantly to laugh about their confusion. Then the nearest Joel says, "Where are you going? Need a lift?"

"We're taking a tour," another explains. "For old times' sake."

I can't look away. Or blink.

"Ride with us," they suggest, in a chorus.

And that's what I do. Just like that, I'm squeezing in between two Joels, and a third cries out, "Driver, on!" The limousine accelerates with a smooth inevitability, turning twice to put us heading east on Main, following some prearranged course. The conversations are quick and confused. Six right hands point at the same old store front, everyone asking, "Remember when Mom—?" and then pausing to have a good hard laugh. There's no need to tell all of that story, it seems. Then the Joel on my right blurts, "Where's the Aquarius?" Approaching on our right is a new parking garage, tall and massive and without any soul. "It's gone in mine, too," says another Joel. Two others give the same sorry news. A fourth says something about pornography. But with a distinct pleasure, the Joel on my left announces, "I bought mine. Bought it and had it refurbished, and now it's the city's fine arts center."

Bending forward, I read the numbers sewn to their shirts. One-eleven through one-fifteen, then one-seventeen. Where's one-sixteen? Did he have something more interesting planned? I start to ask, but I can't find my voice.

A movie is named, then the same Joel asks, "Where did you first see it?"

One of them hasn't.

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Two more saw it years later, on DVD.

But three of them first experienced it at the Aquarius. Then one-eleven asks, "With who?" and a watchful silence clamps down on them. In the same sly, knowing way, three of the Joels glance my way.

Pauline is the answer.

"What exactly are you doing?" I mutter.

The Joel on my right—one-seventeen—gives my shoulder a friendly pat, explaining, "We've just come across, and we're trying to decide where our lives diverge. That's the game of the moment."

"So," I manage. "How many of you have dated my wife?"

One-seventeen starts to ask, "I don't know. Who's your wife—"

"Pauline Gamble," another guesses.

I give a quick nod.

There's a momentary silence, then five of them lift their right hands, solemn expressions marred by a boyish pleasure. Giggles leak out. Someone says, "In high school," and three others admit, "Afterward, too."

I look at those three. "Did you marry her?"

Two of them say, "No," in the same breath.

"So who did she marry?" I have to ask.

"You," says one of them. "A year after I left Stanford."

"I don't remember," says another.

Then the third Joel deftly moves them back to the game at hand. "That's where we split," he says. "Somewhere in the sophomore year in college, it looks like." And he gives me a tiny glance, the eyes saying everything.

One-thirteen.

I make sure of that number. Then I sit back, ignoring the buzz of the conversations, nothing mattering now but the strange flow of my own little thoughts.

We were married during our junior year.

There was nothing particularly romantic or dramatic about our getting back together. It was just something that just seemed to happen. A year earlier, I got up my courage and drove over to her folks' house—Pauline was still living with them—and sitting on the lumpy sofa in that tiny living room, I told her that I'd been an ass and selfish, and I didn't expect things to be the same right away. But if she was willing, maybe we could go out on a date sometime. For dinner, maybe. Or to see a movie down at the Aquarius.

Pauline was pleased, but sensible. "First things first," she told me flat out. "My goals haven't changed. I want commitment, and that's what I'm going to find. With you, or without you."

And that's when I told her, "I want commitment, too."

Speaking with the easy conviction of a man who's coming to realize, at long last, the feel of his own heart.

Leo is sitting in front of the television. He's wearing headphones and a textbook is open in his lap, yet my first impression is that he hasn't been reading or listening to his music or even watching the obnoxious sitcom. He's just sitting there, waiting. And now the wait is over, and he can growl at me, "You're late," with the easy anger of a fourteen-year-old who's been wronged.

I admit, "I got delayed," and then I catch myself. Why should I have to beg for my son's forgiveness?

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Leo hits me with his eyes.

"What?" I ask. Then a more pressing question occurs to me, a sudden little panic taking hold of me. "Where's your mother?"

"In your bedroom," he tells me. Then with a low menace, he adds, "She's been on the phone for half an hour."

"With who?"

"*Him*," Leo mutters.

"The one who called before? Nine?"

My stupidity is a source of deep frustration. Leo shakes his head, grunts from his belly, then explains, "I don't know which one. But it's *him*."

I just stand there, waiting for my emotions to find one direction.

My inaction enrages Leo. He shuts his book hard, then says, "There's this kid at school. Mark Usher."

Usher? Why does that name—?

"You went to school with his folks," my boy explains. "His mom was one of Mom's best friends, back then."

"I remember. What about her?"

"*He* started coming by their house. He's like number . . . I don't know . . . eighty-something. He came from his world with a sack of diamonds, and he's bought himself a new Mercedes, and he drove over and asked Mark's mom out on a date—"

"His folks—?"

"They're still married, yeah!" The boy is angry and ready to cry. I haven't seen him this way for years. "Anyway, now Mark's mom has moved out. She's even talking about moving back to the fucking asshole's—"

"Your language," I reprimand.

He looks straight through me, saying, "The fucker's world. She's going to leave this Earth for good."

"Your mother isn't going anywhere," I tell Leo. Then I find the strength to start walking, heading back toward the master bedroom, saying, "Stay here," to a boy that doesn't want to move an inch.

The bedroom door is shut but not locked.

I hear Pauline talking quietly, then falling silent. But she isn't hiding anything from me. She doesn't even seem to notice that I have arrived. She's sitting against a hill of pillows, a box of tissues beside her and one wadded-up tissue nestled in her free hand. Her head is cocked sideways. She's listening to a voice that I can just make out as I step up to the bed. At the last moment, she glances at me, wet eyes blinking once, then staring mournfully into my eyes.

I don't know what I'll do next.

At moments like this, it's easy to believe that in a nearly infinite tangle of universes, I will do every imaginable thing. But what seems best to me, standing in the middle of what feels like my one and only life, is to take the phone from her hand, holding it to my ear and saying in a calm, level voice, "Hey, Joel. This is Ross Kaline."

A woman says, "Hey, Ross."

"Becky?" I sputter.

"Maybe we can chat later," she snarls. "But now, why don't you put my sister back on? Would you do that for me, Ross?"

I obey instantly.

And with a sobering stare, Pauline explains to me, "One-sixteen married my sister," as her hand covers the mouthpiece. "His Becky died last year of

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cancer. Breast cancer. I wanted to warn her, and tell her to get an examination tomorrow. And that's all this is, Ross. That's all this is."

Our Joel has been married for fifteen years. Mrs. Montgomery is a local girl with big dreams, and marrying the wealthiest bachelor in town was just one dream come true. Now she lives in New York and Paris, and her visits home are rare and practically invisible. A divorce would be ēnormous and messy. What our golden couple have settled into is an open marriage. Joel is free to date, and Mrs. Montgomery buries herself in political causes and high fashion. Everyone in a position to know claims that the Montgomerys get along quite well with each other, and even better when there's an ocean between them.

There are no children, which helps our conservative citizens accept this situation.

Our Joel seems to appreciate the life of the discreet playboy.

"He's not a natural husband," Pauline once told me. She was explaining why I was the lucky one, speaking either to me or to herself. "He's awfully distracted and full of himself. Past the smarts and the charm, there isn't much to him."

I had to ask, "With smarts and charm, and the money, what else do you need?"

And she gave me a withering stare, saying, "Honey," with a pointed tone. "I really wish you could see yourself now."

Two days later, a local fisherman snags a naked corpse.

The body hasn't had time to stiffen, yet before it reaches the coroner's, Mark Usher, Sr., has been arrested and booked for the murder of Joel Eighty-eight. Word leaks out by the end of the day, and what until now has been a carefully orchestrated publicity stunt is finished. Is forgotten. What replaces the press releases and puff pieces is a riot of cameras and hard-charging reporters. Within another day or two, there isn't an empty room in the local Motel Six, and the poor limousines can't navigate down our streets anymore, what with all the vans and buses sporting dishes and Action News insignias.

This was inevitable, some claim. Something had to go wrong, and our Joel had to anticipate it from the beginning. Indeed, a sufficiently suspicious person might claim that this was part of some great scheme: The novelty of a couple hundred billionaires starts to wear down, so now we need a body count and some human passion to build a new and durable interest in this crazy festival.

I am a suspicious soul, but only about things closer to home.

"So how many of them are calling you?" I finally ask Pauline. Then before she can answer, I add, "I bet they call you at work. When they know I'm not around."

"That's what they do," she admits. Then she does a good job of shrugging, telling me, "There's maybe half a dozen. My assistant screens everything for me. Phone calls. E-mail. Snail mail. All of it."

I find that heartening, and inadequate.

"What do they want from you?" I have to ask. "Besides the Joel who warned you about Becky, I mean."

"Another called about her today," Pauline replies. "Two-six-oh, I think he was."

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"He'd married her, too?"

"No. That Becky was on his staff for a few years, and she died, and he thought it would be nice, you know . . . making sure that our Becky knew about the possibilities. . . ."

"That is nice," I admit.

She nods and crosses her arms over her chest.

I'm sitting beside her on the sofa. Leo is staying with friends tonight. The house is ours. Yet the best I can do with this windfall is clear my throat, then ask, "Are many of them married to you?"

"Many of who? The Joels who keep calling?"

"All of them," I repeat. "You've got plenty of friends and co-workers. It's the only subject anymore. Someone must have said something."

"A few of them. I guess."

"Married *you*," I add. Just so we know what we're talking about.

"Someone rather like me. Yes, Ross."

"What do you think happened? I wasn't there to win your heart, or you just preferred him over me?"

She gives me a murderous look, then says, "Change nothing. Okay? I dated him during high school, and afterward, I dated you. Then it was him, briefly. Then back with you. And I married you. Okay? Do you remember this story?"

"There's no reason to—"

"Quiet," she snarls. Then she tells me, "Think back. We're in my parents' living room. They're out for the evening, and things get pretty hot between us, and we put away our common sense."

"I remember."

"We didn't get caught that time."

"I remember."

"By *anything*. Including nature."

Then she sits back, watching me until I see the obvious.

"You got pregnant with him. Is that it?"

"*I* didn't," she growls.

"I know, someone like you."

Pauline gives me a long minute to stew, then says, "Most of the Joels . . . the ones who bother with me . . . they want to know how things turned out for me here. They want to tell me about the children that I'll never know. That sort of crap." She pauses, then admits, "That first one who called? Joel Nine? He's divorced from . . . I guess she's Pauline Nine. They have two daughters, and the older girl is about to graduate from Stanford, with honors. Which seems to mean a lot to him."

I don't know what to say.

"Joel Nine's been the biggest problem," she confesses. "He seems to think that winning me over is a real possibility, and he can somehow make up for whatever bullshit he pulled in that other universe."

I know what to say, but I can't find the breath.

So Pauline says it for me. Shaking her head and looking at the floor, she remarks, "This is hard on everyone. Not just you, Ross. It's never just you."

Stan doesn't come to work that next Monday, and before the second pot of coffee is made, everyone knows why. His young second wife has moved into a hotel room just three blocks down the street, and she'll be living there un-

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til her boyfriend takes her back through the mirror, leading her to a new life on a world that must sound just a little bit more splendid than this one.

"Is it the Joel she screwed at the party?" someone asks.

Our office authority shakes his head, and laughs, and tells us, "No, it's a new one. Three hundred-something."

The Joels are practically flowing out of the mirror now. This festival business has moved past the bizarre, past the simply absurd, and now is edging into the plain old silly. How many billionaires can you shove into one little city? At what point will there be too many swollen egos on this one patch of ground, some critical mass achieved and a flash of white light leaving everything burnt and dead?

"Where's Stan now?" I ask.

"At his lawyers'," the authority reports. "Unless he's hanging out in the hotel lobby, waiting to shoot the Joel wearing the right number."

"You mean the wrong number," someone adds.

Everyone enjoys a good grim laugh.

Then one guy has to mention, "It's not just Stan who could get burned here. If you think about it."

Suddenly my co-workers are giving me pointed looks.

Then the same guy steps forward, saying, "Ross," in a certain way. He's this little whisper of a shit who usually lives under my radar. But I'm noticing him today. He shows me a weird, self-involved smile, and from someplace deep and dreamy come the words, "How is your wife? Is Pauline well?"

The office holds its collective breath.

"What's this?" I growl. "You think I'm going to make one of these Joels into fish food?"

The little shit can't stop grinning, winking at me as he says, "But Ross, there's only one Joel who really matters. If you think about it."

I decide on lifting weights instead of lunch. But after going to the trouble of changing clothes and climbing to the weight room, my resolve is yanked away. Four Joels are running together on neighboring treadmills, and a fifth is working his abdominals. The runners have the same smooth gait, except that the nearest Joel is heavier and noticeably slower. It's the abdominal Joel who notices me, waving for me to come over, acting eager to chat. Except I don't want to chat, and that's why I back right out of there and beat a quick retreat to the locker room, putting my suit and tie back on again, then sprinting out to the street.

The usual gang is having lunch at the new place off Market Square. I spot at least three Joels on the walk there. One drives a Lexus. Another is climbing out of a limousine. And the third is giving a street corner interview to a foreign news crew. He says, "Yes, I've had a wonderful time." Then he waits for the translator to turn his words into what I'm guessing is Swedish. Then he adds, "On my world, I don't get back to my childhood home. So yes, this has been a very pleasant journey."

Our eyes meet, but there isn't a trace of recognition in that Joel's face.

The restaurant is packed. My gang is crowded around a tiny table, elbows bumping elbows. "What's going on?" I ask.

Somebody points with an elbow.

A wicker screen has divided the restaurant. The far end of the place is filled with Joels. I notice a few of their faces and I can hear their same-sounding voices, and suddenly all of the Joels are laughing from their bel-

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lies. Waitresses and the hostess are scurrying, trying to keep their important guests happy. My one-time waitress, leggy Heather, is carrying a single glass of water toward the party. She avoids me and glides on, and one of my friends has to say, "You two are on the outs, huh?"

"Yeah, I got bored," I offer.

They laugh, then someone else says, "There's room at the bar now."

But I'm not really hungry, I discover. So I step back outside and start walking back to the office. There's a cookie shop along the way. I stop in for a snack, and because I don't want to be back at work too soon, I sit at the plastic counter, eating a cookie as big as a manhole cover, ignoring the pedestrians streaming past.

When the shop's door opens, a bell sounds.

After the third or fourth bell, a familiar voice says, "Ross."

I take a last bite of cookie, folding the napkin with the crumbs neatly inside. Then I look at the number on the polo shirt. Five-forty-five. And I half-glance at the face, then I stare hard at the remains of my cookie.

"I saw a picture of you," says that Joel. "You are Ross Kaline, aren't you?"

"So?"

A hand is offered. Is ignored. Then he tells me with a great seriousness, "We were ten years old and climbing that big weeping willow below the schoolyard."

I remember the tree. "So what?" I ask.

"I was terrified of heights. But not you. You just kept pulling yourself higher—"

Now I actually look at his face. At the big and sad and astonished eyes. "So what happened?"

But all he can do is sputter, "God, is it ever good to see you again, Ross. Really!"

The last time I saw them together was Pauline's thirtieth birthday. Her sister and I threw an enormous surprise party for the old lady, and you can guess which one of us sent Joel his own invitation. I didn't even know the guy was there until after the roasts and toasts were done. Pauline went to the john, then she didn't come back. I went looking for her. The old lovers were standing near the front door of the German-American Club. Joel wore casual clothes, a winter coat thrown over one arm.

"Hey, guy," I said. "Just get here?"

He showed me a smile and said, "Ross," with a tone that was nothing but friendly. "No, I'm just leaving."

"I didn't see you," I complained.

"I was in the back, watching," he explained. Then he turned that smile on Pauline, adding, "Like I said. Congratulations, and it's been a really nice party."

"It has been," my wife purred, slipping her strong arm around my waist.

"You're lucky," he told her.

"I am," she agreed.

A wave of good gushy noise, but all I could think was that I wanted Joel out the door. And when he was gone, all I could think to say was, "That busybody sister of yours," with a deep, despairing fury.

Pauline glared at me.

Then she quietly and sharply told me, "You know, Ross. You're really close to spending everything. Every penny this wonderful night has earned you."

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* * *

There is an ugly little bar on the way home from work. It suits my needs because it's on the way, and it isn't the sort of place where billionaires hang out, and the patrons don't give a shit about anything but cheap beer and keno. I spend better than an hour in that good smoky darkness. I'm actually feeling good about things by the time I get home. Good, and maybe a little bit drunk. I don't bother pulling into the garage. I try coming in through the front door, but my keys fall out of my hand. I have to kneel to pick them up, and by the time I'm up again, the door has opened itself. And standing on the other side of the storm door, fuming and red-faced, is Leo.

Stupidly, I observe, "You don't look too good."

He just about explodes. I can see the hot blood pumping into his taut, miserable face, and I hear the first words slipping out from between pursed lips. "Where have you . . . have you . . . Jesus, Dad. . . !"

"What?" I grunt. "Is something wrong?"

Everything must be. But instead of explaining the disaster, Leo asks me, "Have you seen Mom?"

"Mom?"

"Remember her?" he growls.

I don't appreciate that tone from my son. But I do my very best to keep my poise, straightening my back and hoping that my eyes appear clear and sober. Then with a voice that sounds perfectly reasonable to me, I ask him, "What? Isn't she home yet?"

The boy flaps his arms, saying, "Duh! No!"

I have no idea what to say next.

With a sputtering, desperate voice, Leo admits, "I was hoping that she was . . . you know, with you. . . ."

I look at my watch. I actually stare at its face, the mechanics of time confounding me for a moment. Then I manage to suggest, "Maybe she stayed late at work."

"She didn't. I called."

Huh, I think. Huh.

Leo finally opens the storm door, inviting me inside. "She was supposed to be home early tonight. She was going to take me shopping." That from a boy who can't stand being seen at the mall with his mother. "So I called her office, and she's gone. Gone since before five."

It's nearly eight o'clock now. How did it get so late?

Leo barks at me, "Where have you been?"

"A late meeting," I lie. And badly. Then the adrenaline kicks in, and it occurs to me where Pauline might have gone.

"Who are you calling?" Leo asks.

"Aunt Becky," I admit.

"You think she's there?"

No, but I say, "Maybe. I bet so."

"I hope so."

Becky picks up after the first ring, and flat out, I ask, "Do you know where she is?"

On a normal night, the woman has a deeper voice than Pauline. But tonight it is extra thick and a little tight, aiming for anger but ending up at scared. She says, "Ross?" because I neglected to identify myself. Then she gives a little sob and says, "Yeah, I know where she is. As it happens."

I wait a moment, then ask, "With you?"

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My sister-in-law says, "She was." Then before we can forget who matters here, she adds, "They found a lump. By the way. But it looks like the doctors will be able to get it before it's too late."

It takes me a long moment to decipher that odd news. Then a genuine relief takes hold of me, and I say, "Well, good. Great."

"Thanks." Becky sniffs, then says, "I'm not supposed to tell you where she went. Ross? Are you listening?"

"You're not supposed to tell me. Yeah, I got that."

"There was a call. For her. And she left here about an hour ago."

"And you can't tell me where she went."

"I promised."

"Good for you. Tell me where."

"I can't, Ross."

"Then why are we talking?"

"Because," Becky growls into the receiver. "Because you're going to ask yourself, 'Where would my wife go that would really piss me off?' And then you'll realize where, and we can hang up on each other. How's that?"

There are larger mansions along the boulevard. And glitzier ones. And some of Joel's neighbors have front lawns that stretch for what seems like miles before you reach their castle-like front doors. But our Joel has that endearing common touch. His little house is thirty rooms, tops, and it's set close to the street, and it's simple dark brick and asphalt shingles—ordinary to the brink of drab. Every local soul knows his address. Everyone has driven past the mansion at least once. Except for a few hidden cameras, there's never been any trace of real security. It's almost easy to believe you could pull up into Joel's looping driveway and ring the bell . . . the master of the house answering it himself, wearing nothing but a favorite bathrobe and a two-day growth of beard. . . .

At least that's the illusion.

But even the false familiarity has been thrown aside tonight. I'm five blocks from the Joel's when a barricade and a platoon of off-duty cops stop my car. The burliest man taps on my window, and when I drop it, he sticks his head inside, saying, "Sir," with too much respect. "Do you happen to live on this street, sir?"

He already knows that I don't. I don't belong here, and everything about me makes that glaringly apparent. But I manage to say, "Joel," with a genuine familiarity. "I was wondering if I could see him."

The burly man inhales, getting ready to send me off with my tail dragging.

But then I think to say, "Actually, it's my wife that I'm after. Her name is Pauline Kaline. She's an old friend of Joel's, and I'm sure if you call someone and ask, you'll find out that she's there . . . and, well . . . how about calling. . . ?"

He gives me a hard look, then backs away.

I'm wishing that I'd brought Leo along. The kid would probably be sobbing by now, scared that he's losing his mother, and that would make a convincing bit of theater. But one scared person is enough, I keep telling myself.

Then the security guard comes back to me. He looks grim. Almost angry. But he gives me a one-finger wave, saying, "Three blocks, and there's a slot on your right where you can park. Leave everything but yourself inside your vehicle. Am I understood, sir?"

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Perfectly, yes.

The promised slot is waiting. The rest of the wide street and most of the long driveways are choked with limousines and Mercedes and a cadre of uniformed and very bored drivers, and I'm wondering what the neighbors think about Joel's month-long party. Or has he paid them off? It wouldn't be too surprising, particularly since doctors and lawyers are rarely worth as much as they pretend to be.

The last mansion is lit up, and lights have been strung from the trees, making the front and side yards almost day-bright. Another security man appears from one of the scarce bits of shadow, greeting me by name. "You have to wear this. At all times, sir." He fastens a namecard to my shirt, but he doesn't search me. "Have a good time, sir."

"I'm looking for my wife," I confess.

He shakes his head, saying, "I can't share that information. I'm sorry." But then he gives me a grin, adding, "Most of the guests are out back. To your left, and follow the lighted path. Sir."

No, Joel doesn't own an imposing mansion. But what most people don't realize is that he has several acres of lush woods and manicured lawns that you can't see from the street. The lawn directly behind the house is as big as a football field, and it's well-lit and jammed with bodies, and most of the bodies are Joels. But even expecting it isn't enough. I feel surprised, and horrified, and in some ways thrilled, and in other ways, I'm very close to panic. And everything turns worse when a hundred same-sounding voices shout at me, "Ross," with a genuine familiarity.

There must be some alternate universe where I turn and run. And I'm sure there's a bunch of realities where I fall, descending into a delicious insanity. But in this particular realm, I stand my ground, watching the familiar face come at me from every direction, everyone asking, "How are you, Ross? How have you been, Ross? Have you had anything to eat, Ross? Don't you look fit?"

There's enough ambient light to read everyone's number.

My eyes bounce from chest to chest, and then I give up. I start pushing through the crowd, fending off questions and plates of free food. Pretty women, young and not so young, are dressed in low-cut gowns or trampish jumpsuits, each clinging to her particular Joel. I stare at each of their faces. I'm looking for my wife. That's the only person who matters, I tell myself. Nobody else here is real. Not in my universe, at least.

"Hey, Ross!"

I shrug off the hand, but it comes again. Hard.

"Ross!" the Joel shouts.

I turn and give him a warning stare, then almost as an afterthought, I glance down at the telltale number sewn into his polo shirt.

Nine, I read.

Twice.

My stare brightens and grows hot.

My enemy smiles at me with a mixture of smugness and disdain. And with a matching voice, he says, "You look bothered by something. What is it, Ross? Some sort of personal trouble?"

"Where is she?" I blurt.

"Why? Don't you know where she is?"

I start looking at the nearby bodies, my eyes lingering on every tall blonde.

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"Ross," he purrs, "you're not taking good care of your wife. I mean, if you don't know where she is—"

That's when I hit the son-of-a-bitch.

I mean to put him on his ass, to make him bleed, but I don't get much practice with fistfights. Joel Nine manages to lift his left, absorbing most of my punch and keeping his feet under him. Then he hits me. I don't know why, but there's something pathetic about his counterpunch. It's amazingly hard, bordering on vicious, and there's plenty of emotion and planning behind it. I can tell that he wants to drop me. But he's smaller than me by a long ways, and he's rich, and he just looks silly. His first blow clips me in the chin, and I'm stunned. Then he delivers two quick blows to my belly. But I'm plenty angry myself, and I've done a lot of abdominals in my day. I tolerate the blows. To the casual observer, I look like the passive victim in this brawl. Joel Nine seems to realize that he isn't hurting me. So he swings for my face, and I throw myself back to make him miss. Then I give the little shit a simple shove, and he drops, and just like that I'm standing over him, my foot pressed against his chest as I shout at his contorted, embarrassed face, "Where is she, you bastard? Where's my wife—?"

A familiar hand takes me by the elbow, and tugs.

"Hey, Ross," says the newcomer. "Pauline isn't with him."

I glance over my shoulder, and I stare.

The man wears a simple dark One sewn into the lapel of his rather rumpled suit, and he smiles at me for a long moment. Then with a quiet, no-nonsense voice, he says, "Ross," once again.

Our Joel tells me, "Pick up your foot."

He says, "Really, you should let that poor bastard breathe."

We're strolling through an enormous library, acres of old books set behind glass and computer monitors everywhere else. The silence is nearly perfect. Is delicious. But with a loud, irritable voice, I ask, "Where's Pauline?" Even to myself, I sound bitter. Irrational. Joel gives me a little look and says nothing. So I blurt out, "She came here to see you, didn't she? Isn't that it?"

He watches his books. "No, Ross. I haven't seen your wife tonight."

"What. . . ?" I sputter.

"But she is here," he continues, glancing at me again. A look that might or might not be a smile comes into his face, and he tells me, "I know exactly where she is. And I can tell you exactly what she's doing now."

My hands are shaking. I'm that nervous.

"So, Ross, are you curious about how I know all this?"

With a tenth of my heart, I whisper, "Yeah. Sure."

A warm, smug grin shows itself. "The numbers," he says, rubbing the simple black One with a finger and thumb. "Each has embedded circuits, a sensitive microphone, and both a transmitter and a homing beacon that are always broadcasting. Every word spoken is recorded in full. As is the precise location of each of my guests."

"Do they know it?"

He laughs, admitting, "Of course they know. It's a key part of the plan. The deal. In fact, it's the whole point for this elaborate, self-congratulatory exercise."

I have to admit, "I don't understand. What's the plan?"

Joel just smiles at me, saying, "This way. There's something I want to show you, Ross."

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Past the library is a staircase that leads to the basement, then deeper. I can smell the newness of everything. A single armored door is guarded by two men and half a dozen cameras. The men say, "Sir," and scan Joel, some odd machine looking into his left armpit. Then they say, "Sir," with more life, opening the door, allowing both of us to walk into an enormous, brightly lit chamber.

"What's with the armpit?" I manage.

"In addition to numbers," he says, "each of us wears a tiny implanted chip. It helps to keep us from cheating, and if we're found dead and stripped naked—"

"Like the murdered Joel," I offer.

"We're identified right away, yes. And then our voice records can be analyzed, our killer is named, and he's arrested almost instantly." Joel gives a weary shrug, shaking his head as he admits, "It was a tragedy, and a huge surprise. Honestly, Usher wasn't the guy I'd have picked as a vengeful husband."

"Would you pick me?"

Joel considers the words, my face. But instead of answering, he says, "This way. Let me show you my mirror."

A chill reaches along my spine.

The far wall is curved, and what looks at a distance like white plaster turns into a silvery glimmer broken up with bars of darker gray. Each bar represents another Earth. I've read about this machinery, and I've seen enough pictures to know. After each Joel comes across, the portal to his Earth needs to be maintained. Otherwise, there's no reliable way for him to find his home again. But a full-sized image would consume fantastic amounts of power, which is why nearly five hundred vertical gray streaks flank the glimmering center of the fantastic device.

Except for us, the room is empty.

"Nobody's coming across," I observe.

Joel nods, admitting, "Things are complicated enough as it is. Besides, our sample size is just about perfect."

"So what's your great plan?" I press.

"All these other Joels," he says. "Think about them. Think about the risks they've taken to come here. To our Earth." A curved red line is drawn on the white tiled floor, and he stops us just short of the line. "Imagine a terrorist bomb, or a one-second power outage. Anything that causes the mirror to turn off would be a disaster for them. In the infinite ocean of the hyperverse, how would they ever find their way back to their specific home again?"

I don't understand his point, and it shows on my face.

"These are just a few of the Joels that I've seen," he says. "These Joels have made money. They have success. But they've also lost the great loves of their lives, or they've been cheated by trusted friends. In a lot of cases, they're extremely insecure in ways that only the rich can be. So they come here to commune with souls who perfectly understand their situation, and while that happens, I collect data. My staff and machines help me piece together their life stories. Like that time you rode in the limousine, for instance. And the Joels were talking about the old theater. Remember? That's precious stuff. Better than diamonds and stock options, if you're like us. Where did things go wrong in their lives? What talented people have they ignored on their Earths? Who can they trust, and love, and who back home should they watch with increased scrutiny?"

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"That's what this is about?" I mutter. "Joels helping Joels?"

"For the time being, yes." He nods and shrugs, adding, "But in ten years, or twenty, the mirror technology will get much, much cheaper. Most people will be able to rent one. What I'm doing here will be relatively common. Maybe it won't involve traveling between Earths, but there'll certainly be a huge exchange of knowledge. Of experience. Of things that will hopefully look like wisdom."

I don't know what to say.

"Think of your son. Of Leo." Joel explains, "In twenty years, he could visit a public mirror and ask his alteregos if he should marry so-and-so, or if he's following the best possible career. Or if he should start having his prostate checked for early traces of cancer."

I shiver, for a moment. But my reflexive distrust begins to fade, a genuine fascination starting to take hold.

"Think of it," says Joel. "Think what our little Earth could accomplish if it could cut out just half of its missteps."

"You make it sound noble, this ego-fest of yours."

He laughs.

For the last time, I ask, "Where is Pauline?"

"When I checked last, your wife was sitting in my kitchen, having coffee and a conversation." Then to make things perfectly clear, he touches me on the forearm, and with a quiet, respectful voice, he says, "You know, Ross, I've met about twenty Joels who tried to steal Pauline from you. On their Earths, I mean. And do you know how many of them succeeded? Try to guess."

"All of them?" I mutter. Then I say, "Half," with a desperate hopefulness.

"Try just one," he says. "Only one Pauline left you, and she eventually came back to you again."

I feel weak, and happy, and as stupid as I can ever remember feeling.

"One of the last Joels came across this afternoon," my Joel explains. "On his Earth, your parents died in a car wreck. You were eighteen. You inherited the house and some IBM stock, and I approached you with my best sales pitch, and for whatever reason, you and I became full partners. For better than twenty years, we succeeded at everything. Everything. Then you acquired an aggressive colon cancer and died two months ago. Which is why that Joel called your sister-in-law. He was looking for you. All he wanted was to give you fair warning about what may or may not be your own future."

"Pauline's talking to him?" I manage.

"And six other Joels who are good friends of yours. Who speak glowingly about you, in fact." He smiles, adding, "I suggested the meeting. As a little favor to the both of you."

"Thanks," I sputter.

He just smiles at me. A little guy with a big smug grin, something still waiting to be said.

"What?" I snap.

"Nothing happens once in the hyperverse," he explains. "If you're a billionaire on any Earth, then you're a billionaire on billions more."

I glance at the silvery mirror.

He waves me toward the machine, explaining, "Wealth is a matter of luck, and luck is inevitable, Ross."

I start to step across the red line. Then I think better of it, turning back and telling him, "I'm not going to. Not like this."

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"Why not? Aren't you curious who's going to look back at you?"

Then I tell him what I want.

And Joel's eyes become as big as platters, and he says, "Oh, sure. Damn. Why didn't I think of that?"

Pauline has been crying. The red eyes and the puffy cheeks tell me that much. She enters the big room at a half-run, grabbing hold of me and practically clinging, her mouth pushed into my ear, whispering, "You've got to go to the doctor. Tomorrow. Promise me!"

"I promise. Absolutely."

Then she sniffs and looks over my shoulder, asking, "Is that what I think it is?"

"Come on," I tell her. And I take her hand, pulling her past the red line, moving us close enough to the mirror that it can see us in our intricate entirety—two living and unique organisms walking arm in arm, presenting themselves to the fantastic depths of the hyperverse.

There comes a tingling sensation, a crackling of static and a whiff of ozone.

And just like that, the mirror becomes perfectly reflective, and we see our reflections smiling back at us.

They're wearing different clothes than ours. A black tux and a long gown, both with some odd fashion flourishes. But they have our faces, our souls. Our own astonished smiles.

I lift my hand, ready to wave.

And the other Ross lifts his hand in the same motion, at the same instant.

Then both of the women take that waving hand in theirs, and they turn their husbands with the same strong motion, and now I'm staring at no one but my wife. At her pretty, perfect face. Marveling at the simple inevitability of Luck. ○

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HALF A LOAF

Steven Utley

Illustration by Alan Giana

Although life may be filled with adventures and challenges, growth and change, Steven Utley explores why it seems like we often linger in a permanent winter of discontent.

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January 2001

"Are you sure," someone asked, again, in a liquor-thickened voice, "we'll be able to see it?"

Gabbert answered, for what seemed like the hundredth time, "Yes," clipping off the word with his teeth. He was tall and thin in the moonlight, and his expression suggested that he found the night sky, or perhaps the company in which he viewed it, somehow displeasing. Few other people, nothing like the number he felt should have turned out for the occasion, had climbed the stony slope above the camp. Gabbert sighed and shifted his gaze to the summit. A structure of indeterminate but vaguely skeletal shape and considerable size gleamed dully far back among the rocks on the ridgetop. The sight did not have an entirely calming effect on him, and he looked hurriedly away. Tonight he felt conflicted about nearly everything.

Two human figures detached themselves from the camp and began to ascend the slope toward him. There was no mistaking the thickset Helen Wheeler, but Gabbert did not recognize the person accompanying her. She called up, "Tom's not coming. I tried to get him up, but he told me to go away and turned over and went back to sleep."

Typical, Gabbert thought. Most expedition members who had spent the day collecting botanical specimens along the margin of the mudflat, or digging invertebrates out of the mudflat itself, or prying fossils from the cliffs back of the camp, now slept the profound, justified sleep of people who had physically exhausted themselves doing work they loved. Tent flaps were opened, tent sides furled, to give the sleepers the benefit of the least breath of wind, but the air hardly moved at all, as though it were weighed down by the damp rank smell of stagnant mud. The Quonset huts that formed the relatively permanent part of the camp were darkened. The surface of the bay lay so smooth and black that the large Navy ship and its brood of auxiliary craft appeared to rest on a slab of obsidian.

Wheeler reached him puffing and sweaty. Her companion was a wiry middle-aged man dressed in Navy tropicals. She gasped, "Like you to meet Navy Chaplain Madiel."

"How do you do?" Gabbert perfunctorily shook hands, then, after a moment's hesitation, turned and indicated a man sitting nearby. "Helen, this is Roger Ovington. Meteorologist. Helen Wheeler. Her specialty is dirt or bugs, I forget which."

"Gab's," said Wheeler, "is hot gas."

"Oh," said the chaplain as he shook hands with the meteorologist, "*you're* Roger Ovington. Your reputation precedes you. Somebody told me you're the best-read person in the Paleozoic."

"How do you find the Paleozoic?"

Madiel recited:

"The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud because
No cloud was in the sky.
No birds were flying overhead—
There were no birds to fly."

Gabbert and Wheeler regarded him in astonishment. Ovington merely grinned. "Lewis Carroll!"

"A Navy man who quotes poetry," Wheeler said, "and a weatherman who recognizes it!"

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"God bless liberal arts," Gabbert said dryly. "Roger's on his way home tomorrow, fortunately."

"That's too bad," said the chaplain. "It's been a while since I got to discuss books with anyone. I suppose it serves me right for waiting this long to come ashore. This is my first time."

One of two shaggy individuals sitting a little farther up the slope said, "Well, padre, what kept you?" He laughed raucously and swung his arm in a gesture obviously intended to take in everything, the camp, the marsh, the barren heights. The other shaggy individual said, "What *brought* you?"

Gabbert repressed a shudder. "The paleo boys were let out of their cages, and have consumed their entire whiskey ration tonight."

Madiel peered up the slope at the paleo boys. His tone of voice was friendly, unprovocative; he sounded, Gabbert decided, as though he were addressing strange dogs. "If you mean, what am I doing here generally, I'm a volunteer like everyone else. I willingly let myself be dropped, shot, or in any case transferred through a space-time anomaly for the purpose of tending to the spiritual needs of several hundred officers and enlisted personnel of the United States Navy. But I wanted to see more of this place than you can see from the deck of a ship."

"Well, here's to you, padre!" and there was a faint clink of bottles.

Gabbert turned his back on them, and to fill the silence he asked the chaplain, "How long've you been here?"

"I could probably tell you," said Madiel, "if they hadn't given me that lecture about how the days're a couple or three hours shorter here, and the years a few dozen days longer. I learned that the length of days will increase as the Moon moves away from the Earth, but I couldn't tell you why to save my life."

Ovington exaggeratedly drew a breath and said, very fast, "Conservation of angular momentum requires that the Earth must accelerate if the Moon approaches—and vice versa!"

"Don't mind him," Wheeler said, "we've all learned to say that, but Gab's the only one here who knows what it means."

Gabbert nodded in acceptance of this tribute. "In consequence of the Navy's unfortunate decision to stick to the twenty-four-hour military clock and the Gregorian calendar, everybody is hopelessly confused."

"Well," said the chaplain, "The standard clock and calendar may not be adequate here—"

"They're hardly perfect back home."

"Yes, but they're familiar. They help to keep us anchored. I've heard that somebody, one of you astronomers, devised a clock for a day lasting twenty-one hours and twenty-some-odd minutes, and a four-hundred-day calendar."

"Yes," said Gabbert, sourly, "and just about got tarred and feathered for his trouble, too."

Ovington said, "I found the easiest thing to do was to just not worry what day it was or what time it was. A lot of the time, I couldn't even remember what month it was according to the standard calendar. Hardly makes a difference here. It's not like there're seasons."

"It's almost—" Madiel stopped, stumped for a word to describe what it was almost.

"I just go by the sun," said Wheeler. "I get up and eat breakfast around sunrise. I work till sundown, eat dinner, hit the sack. Tonight's the first time in ages I've looked at a clock. Every seven or ten days, I take a day off. Tomorrow, for example, is my day off. I think it also happens to be Sunday."

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"What does a soil scientist do around here for fun on her day off?"

"Pretty much what everybody else does. I go for walks, listen to music. Oh, and I'm a perfectly lousy landscape painter. But my work's really the most fun I've ever had in my life. It still amazes me I'm here. I was a Tennessee farm girl. F.F.A. in school. Other girls wanted to be prom queen—I thought I'd arrived when I made the Soil Judging Team in my junior year. If I could've seen into the future, this would've blown my mind."

"I'm afraid most Navy men find it pretty unexciting. It's not what they expected. I guess it's exciting if you're a scientist."

"You'd never know it from Gabbert here," Ovington said, "but the astronomers are the giddiest of the lot. I've only had to be around them since I came downriver two days ago, and they already drive me crazy. They sit around all night asking each other questions like, Where are the stars we know? And, What are conditions like on Mars, on Venus? Actually, the questions are more along the lines of, What's going on with that massive black hole at the center of Galaxy M-eight-seven, in the constellation Virgo. And, Where *is* the constellation Virgo?"

The chaplain said, "Well, whatever's going on, wherever—it's quite a sky."

"Personally," Wheeler said, "I miss the constellations."

"They're there." Ovington aimed a forefinger upward and drew an invisible line from some point to some other point.

"Well, are they Paleozoic or twenty-first century constellations? Trilobites or Moon rockets?"

"I don't think anybody knows yet what they are, but they're there."

Gabbert said sharply, "The kind of world view—cosmic view—necessary to arrange stars into constellations doesn't exist any more. Except maybe in Papua or the Australian outback, nobody believes in gods and heroes any more."

"I, of course," said Madiel, "beg to differ. Slightly."

"When I get back," Ovington said, "just one of the things I'll be glad to see again is a familiar sky at night. I miss the Dippers and Orion and the rest. This just adds to my disorientation. Time isn't right, and the stars aren't right. And I miss things—places—that have names. This world needs names. We brought along a few. We've got names for the major landmasses, bodies of water, divisions of time. We're in Laurentia, and out that way—" he pointed seaward "—is the Iapetus Ocean, and beyond the sea is Gondwana. We're straddling the Devo-Silurian boundary. One day this spot we're standing on will be Pennsylvania or Ireland. But we can't go on calling it the part of Laurentia that's going to be Pennsylvania or Ireland. We're making maps of this world, and maps of this sky, and we need names for every island arc, peninsula, bay, river, mountain, and the stars and galaxies. And sooner or later we're really going to have to make up our minds whether it's Thursday and we have to work, or Saturday and we get to sleep in. We're the species that puts names on things. We're a tool-using species, and names are tools."

"Any suggestions, then?" said Gabbert. "I can show you Mars and Venus and Jupiter up there in the sky. I'm afraid we pretty well used up mythology naming everything in the solar system."

"Classical Greek and Roman mythology. So we'll use some other mythologies. We can use H.P. Lovecraft if we have to."

"There are hundreds of saints," the chaplain said, "and thousands of angels and devils. Skyfuls of them."

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"This is the world before the Fall," said Wheeler. "Why set good and evil on each other ahead of schedule? Why not just do what they did when they named craters on the Moon and planets? Name things after scientists. Especially geologists. The Hutton River, Wegener Bay—"

"Wegener was a meteorologist," said Ovington.

Wheeler shrugged. "Mount Murchison. Or even the Murchison Mountain Range. Murchison was a jerk, but he—"

"Was he as big a jerk," asked Ovington, "as Newton?"

"Nobody," Gabbert said crisply, "was as big a jerk as Newton. Or was Murchison a vindictive schemer, too?"

"Well, even if he was, he identified and named the Silurian system. If anyone deserves to be immortalized here, Murchison does."

They lapsed into silence. After about a minute, the paleo boys launched themselves into song.

"Sin," Gabbert said, "has entered the world."

Wheeler said, "I think what I miss about the twenty-first century are flowers and trees. Oh, and the heavenly scent of new-mown grass. Every now and then, I think it would be nice to plant a little garden here. And to have a pet, a cat or a small dog. Something furry and well disposed, anyway. On my days off, I could lounge around with a sketchbook and a cat and a cup of tea and know that civilization is a good thing. Only, we're hundreds of millions of years shy of the first flowering plants and the Age of Mammals, and even if it weren't for regulations I wouldn't want to be the party responsible for complicating life for future paleontologists by having my pet's fossilized poop turn up in Paleozoic strata."

"I miss concerts in the park," the chaplain said, "and birds. I'm a birdwatcher. And I miss going to church."

"Well," said Gabbert, "I never saw that coming."

The chaplain appeared not to take offense. "God is everywhere, of course, and worship is meaningful whether it's done on the quarterdeck or in a church. Or at the bottom of a coal mine for that matter. But for me the experience of being in a church has always been tremendously moving."

"I'm afraid," Wheeler said, "I haven't been to church in years. I was brought up Southern Baptist, but it didn't take."

"Same here," said Ovington, "only I'm a lapsed Unitarian," and he laughed softly.

The chaplain looked at Wheeler. "Why do you say it didn't take?"

"I—I was always told you had to get right with God. That was the way it was phrased. That, and—Accept Jesus as your savior, give your life to God, live your life according to his will. If you could do those things, you would find salvation. But I realized at some point that I had no idea what those phrases *meant*. I tried to live according to the commandments, went to church, said my prayers, but I never felt the presence of God. In fact, I found myself getting farther and farther away from whatever it was that I was trying to get closer to. God. The Cosmic Oneness. I said, here I am, ready and waiting, come and get me. I'm still waiting. But the funny thing is, since I came here, I've become more convinced of God's existence than I ever was before. Sooner or later, I think, I'll make his acquaintance."

She seemed particularly abashed when she made eye contact with Gabbert, who said, "Well, don't look so taken aback because I don't look taken aback. Practically the whole range of believers and non-believers has always been here."

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"Except," Ovington said, "creationists, I bet. Now that would be interesting." He turned to Madiel. "I've got a poser for you, Chaplain. What if the second coming of Jesus Christ happens back in the twenty-first century while you're here in the Paleozoic?"

"Ah, well, I believe I'd be wise to leave that to a committee of theologians and physicists to ponder. Even if they couldn't, I'm sure God's figured it out."

"Optimist. I've got another."

"Don't torment him," Wheeler said, "he's a guest."

"Let's say there's a scientist here who's a devout Muslim. We'll call him Hossein. Hossein's supposed to pray several times a day in the direction of Mecca, which won't exist for another four hundred million years. He can't even pray in the direction of Mecca-to-be, because the landmasses are all moved around, the poles are different, The stars are obviously different. There just aren't any referents, so, for practical purposes, this isn't Earth at all but an Earth-like planet. The planet La Mer."

The chaplain shook his head, and Gabbert told Ovington, "You can come up with the weirdest crap."

Madiel said, "I'm not an expert on Islam. But Hossein, being a man of faith, must know that even if Mecca doesn't exist yet, God does. Perhaps Hossein prays due south, because somewhere down that way is proto-Arabia and the future site of Mecca. But the important thing is, Hossein prays. He places his trust in God's understanding, just as I do. God is eternal understanding. God knows what's important and doesn't sweat the small stuff. He understands if we sometimes have to forego the niceties of worship."

"Like going to church regularly?" said Wheeler.

"He hopes we'll make every effort, of course."

They grew quiet again, all except for the paleo boys, who suffered fits of giggles. Gabbert kept checking his wristwatch. Then he startled the others by saying, "Do you want to know what I really miss about the twenty-first century?"

"Besides family and friends?" said Madiel

Gabbert exhaled dismissively. "There's no family—no wife, no kids, and my parents're both dead. No. What I miss is having the right tools for the job. Like every other scientist here, I've been given an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity to probe into all sorts of ancient mysteries. But I'm having to do it the hard way, on a shoestring budget, using a lot of old-fashioned technology. Cheap rotary rockets capable of lifting satellites into orbit have been around for decades, and we've just now put up one lousy satellite here. We've got a whole new sky to map, and—" he gestured angrily toward the structure atop the ridge "—we're practically having to build a radio telescope out of old screen doors and extension cords!"

"Some folk," said Ovington, "want their luck buttered."

"And why the hell not?"

"It's human nature," the chaplain said to Gabbert, and his voice was different now—it was the voice he had used before to talk to the drunken paleo boys—"to always want a little more that we're given. More money, more love."

"More faith," said Wheeler, "and more talent."

"More life, more life after life."

Gabbert checked his watch again and stepped around the others. "Up yours, Ovington," he said, casually bitter, "and yours, too, Chaplain. I want to do good work here, great work, impeccable work if I possibly can. I want it

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to outlast me. I want the papers I write to be the best ones I can write. This is the work of my life. I want it to be worthwhile."

Gabbert abruptly directed their attention to a particular sector of the heavens. Everyone peered; it took those with untrained eyes several seconds to pick out the small point of silvery light as it moved slowly,serenely, across the black sky. The drunken paleo boys whooped in derision and in unison.

Ovington said, "Tiny little thing."

"It's beautiful," Wheeler breathed.

"It's a start, anyway," said Gabbert.

Ovington gave him a searching look. "Doesn't seeing it up there at last make it the slightest bit harder for you to be pissed off about things in general?"

"Harder, but not impossible."

"You're impossible. My fellow meteorologists will be ecstatic, and the mapmakers, too. And communications. No more futzing around with atmospherics. The Paleozoic Era's finally entering the twenty-first century!"

"It's a start," Gabbert insisted. "Belated, half-hearted, and rather half-assed, too—"

"But a start."

"That thing doesn't do me much good. I need something that looks up, not down."

"When you get back," said Wheeler, "remember to let NASA and the N.S.F. and everyone know exactly how you feel. Then you're sure to get absolutely everything you want." To the chaplain she said, "Gab's just not going to be satisfied until he gets his own vee-el-bee—are you, Gab?"

"Nope. Not until there're radio dishes stretching clear to Gondwana."

After a moment, the chaplain sheepishly asked, "What's a vee-el-bee?"

"Very long baseline array," Ovington said. "It's this big radio-dish link-up stretching from Hawaii to the U.S. Virgin Islands. It acts like a single radio telescope."

They watched as the small point of silvery light continued in its leisurely passage across the sky. The moon looked crisp and sharp and close. The Milky Way looked like lace and frost.

It was Gabbert who broke the silence. "If ever we reached a state where we actually felt we had enough of everything. . . ." He glared around at them. "What would've become of life on Earth if organisms had ever become *content?*"

"Oh, Gab," Wheeler said, "put a sock in it." O

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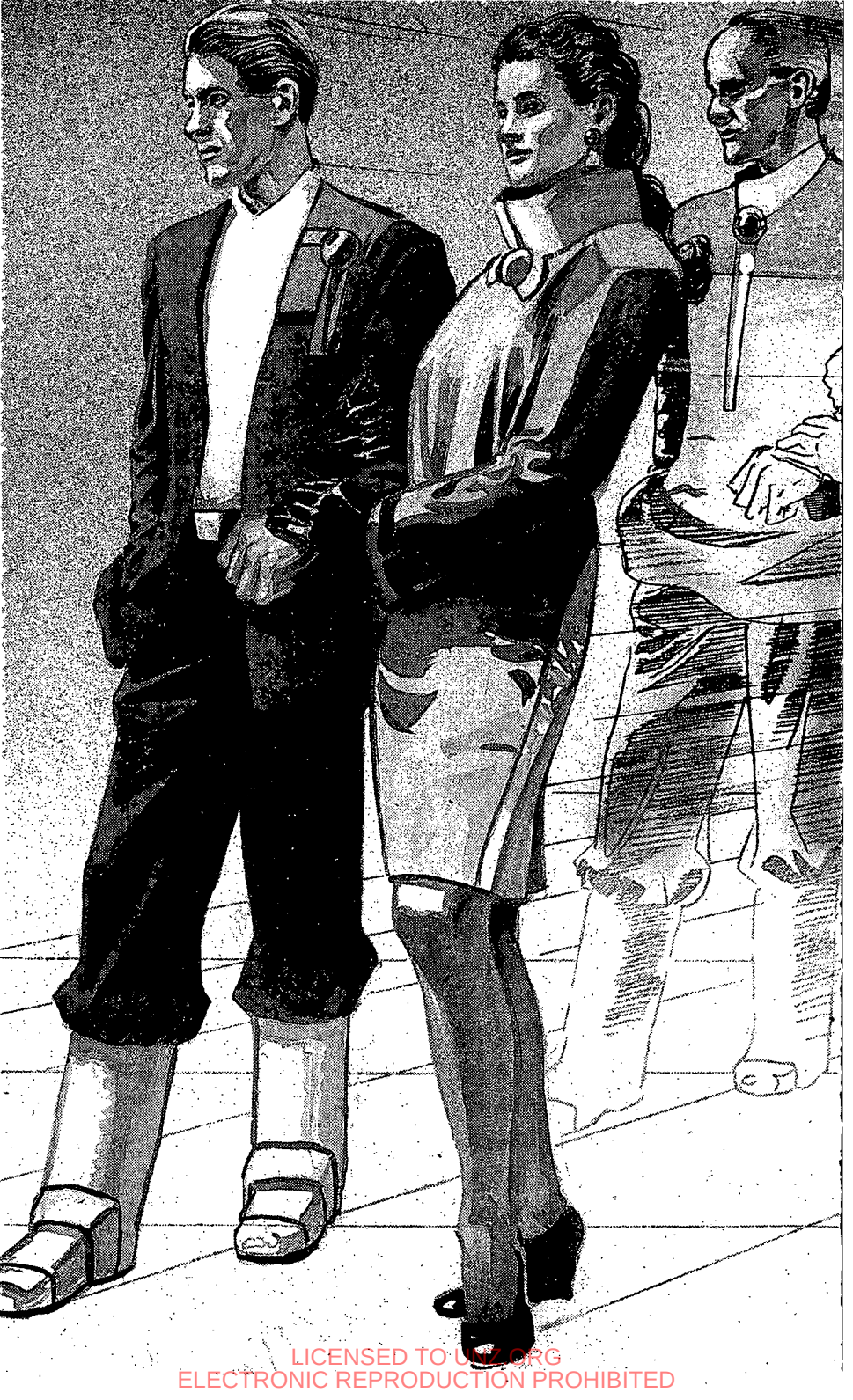

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If you take a trip down Memory Lane
in the city of La Jetée . . .

FROM HERE YOU CAN SEE THE SUNQUISTS

Richard Wadholm

Illustration by Mark Evans

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All that summer, the Sunquists debated a trip to La Jetée. Mr. Sunquist said that summer was the time to go. The tourists would be off to Kleege's Beach, where the hotels were new and no one worried about slipping back and forth in time as they walked down the beach. The Sunquists would have La Jetée to themselves.

Mrs. Sunquist was plainly uneasy about La Jetée. She would not say why. The Sunquists were travelers, after all. Cosmopolitans. They savored a difficult aesthetic experience.

She spoke only of their neighbors, the Dales, who had spent a month in Nepal. "They seemed so happy," she said. "They had their own sherpas. They rode in a cart up to Annapurna, pulled by a team of yetis."

Mr. Sunquist wondered at her reluctance. Was she worried for the baby? He knew that she was nervous. Mrs. Sunquist had the sort of nerves that only a mid-life pregnancy can bring on. But women had babies in La Jetée all the time. Some women spent their entire pregnancies there. Mr. Sunquist proposed nothing more than a week—a farewell to the city of their youth. What could that hurt?

He plied his wife with nostalgia. He reminded her of their first meeting, in the galleries along Gull Street. Mr. Sunquist had purchased mangoes at Sonny's Seafood Chowder Bar and shown her how to eat them with salt and cayenne pepper.

He smiled as Mrs. Sunquist twisted her lips to taste the sweetness of the fruit, the heat of the red pepper. This was one of their quiet and indelible memories together. Mr. Sunquist knew it.

"We can go back and see it, just exactly as it was," he told her.

"Nothing is ever exactly as it was," she said.

"In La Jetée it is," he said. This was not an article of faith on his part. In La Jetée, it was a simple fact.

"What about us? Will we be the same?"

"We will be what we've always been," he promised her. "You'll see."

It was in the nature of the world that their last journey to La Jetée should begin sweetly. Just as the hours of canyon roads had become unendurable, something shimmered in the air, a change of light or air pressure. The road took a turn and they found themselves at the bottom of the cliff road, looking out at the city of their youth.

Mrs. Sunquist had been quiet these last two hours. Now, she could not help smiling. "It's still the most beautiful place we ever lived," she said.

La Jetée glowed under the slanted light of evening, as vivid as a fever dream. Every little outbuilding and café a rich, ridiculous red. Every boat-repair shop a bitter aqua, a harsh viridian.

Melancholy limned the moment. The Sunquists had agreed that this would be their last trip to La Jetée. The baby was coming. They both had experienced things in La Jetée that no one needed to grow up with, Mr. Sunquist had said so himself. That had been an easy decision in their kitchen. As he drank in his last vista of La Jetée, Mr. Sunquist would have taken it back.

"Do you remember that time at Lola's Bookstore," Mr. Sunquist asked his wife, "when Pieczyznski, the chess master, challenged nineteen of his own iterations to speed tournaments?"

"And he beat twelve of them?" She laughed at the image. "And played the other seven to draws. . . ."

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"—And then he killed himself, because twelve of the nineteen were older versions of himself, and he could see how his powers would decline!" The Sunquists shook their heads; this was a favorite memory of theirs. Something they had always planned to get back to see again.

"Do you think we can find that?" she asked.

Mr. Sunquist nodded down the road. The La Jetée of last summer had passed into the expanding time signatures of the Present City. He thought he recognized it, floating against the horizon, spectral and overbright. Or maybe he saw some other iteration, realized by other Sunquists on other summer jaunts.

"He's there," Mr. Sunquist said. "I know that. We need a Feynman diagram to orient ourselves, that's all." He knew a kiosk in the hotel district, they could get one there.

Just off the frontage road, they passed the skeleton of a new luxury hotel, half-built and abandoned. It rose from behind its screen of construction siding like the rusted gantries of some failed cosmodrome. A faded sign promised completion in the spring. It did not mention the year.

Mr. Sunquist winced a little as they drove by. So many friends had gone in with him on this investment. They should have known, he told himself. Vacation real estate can be so risky.

But Mr. Sunquist had no time to indulge regret. His mind was on the row of orchid houses that had been dug under in the hotel's wake. Where was that paella kitchen where he had taught Mrs. Sunquist how to eat mangoes? Or the hotel where they had hidden themselves away from the heat on those breathless August days when the sky was blue-black with unspent rain? A less romantic man would have surrendered these places to the iterations of memory. Mr. Sunquist surrendered nothing.

Twenty-five years up the highway would be the Hotel Mozambique, just as it had been at the height of its renown. During the hot weekends of August, the Sunquists had allowed themselves little vacations from their basement apartment on Four O'Clock Street. The Hotel Mozambique had been their destination. Mr. Sunquist remembered the room they had asked for. Number 219 looked out on the black-bottom pool and the ocean across the road.

Here also would be Sonny's Bar, and the night he had proposed marriage to Melanie Everett. This was one of Mrs. Sunquist's favorite moments.

They would get their room at the Mozambique, he decided. From there, they would find the night of their proposal. But something about their Feynman was corrupted. Or maybe Mrs. Sunquist wasn't reading it properly. Whatever, the Sunquists found themselves retracing a patch of highway twenty-five years up the road. Just as their navigating turned quarrelsome, Mrs. Sunquist sighted a blue-and-white beachcomber bicycle racked up alongside the Ciriquito Street pier.

She pointed into the haze of decoherence that muffled the world beyond the road. In that instant, a moment coalesced before them.

Mr. Sunquist found himself in a narrow parking strip looking down on a gentrified waterfront. Sailboats in slips, cafés with sun decks. Temporal observatories offered "Views of Parallel Worlds!" And, "The Chance to See the Life You Might Have Led!" All for two dollars.

Sonny's Bar nestled into the crook where the Ciriquito Street Pier met the beach. Like every other building on the beach, Sonny's Bar showed its backside to the landlubbers' world. A sign had been painted above the

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dumpsters, reminding all the old neighborhood that Sonny had been serving them in this same location *"Since most of you were underage."*

"I don't see my truck," Mr. Sunquist said. "Are you sure this is the night?"

"You called me from your office and said to meet you here," Mrs. Sunquist said. "I do not make a habit of bicycling to bars. This *is* the night you proposed."

"Maybe we pulled off the highway a few minutes early," Mr. Sunquist offered. He suggested they wait for him inside the bar, just to be sure.

The interior was designed in one of those inverted situations from the turn of some century. The patrons clambered together on a large round cushion the color and texture of boxing gloves. Three bartenders hovered over a counter that encircled them.

TV monitors were placed to catch the eye at every angle. In this age, Sonny's fancied itself a sports bar. But Sonny himself? He liked *novelas*, Mexican soap operas. Two different ones were playing simultaneously as the Sunquists walked in. A regular was complaining that the World Cup was on, Brazil versus Russia. Sonny was laughing and nodding, paying the man no particular mind. His eyes were neither on the man, nor on the screens.

Like everyone else in the room, Sonny watched the girl in the sun dress and sandals. She sat on the quiet side of the circular cushion, away from most of the television screens. She read *Justine* (the one by Lawrence Durrell, not the Marquis de Sade), and nudged a glass of chardonnay around by the stem. Maybe it was something about seeing across twenty-five years in the space of a single room, but Mr. Sunquist imagined that the girl was bathed in a singular light. Maybe it was simply that everyone else seemed to dim by comparison.

The Sunquists found chairs in an alcove beneath one of the television screens. They had a view of the bar from here, and the television to distract anyone who looked their way.

A waiter asked what they were having. Mrs. Sunquist asked for iced tea. ("Iced tea," she snickered, "This kills me.")

Mr. Sunquist liked a scotch and soda, but not here. As he looked across the bar, he recognized iterations of himself and his wife from other summers, all drinking scotch-and-sodas. He did not wish to be known by the sort of drink he ordered. He ordered a glass of merlot.

Mrs. Sunquist put a hand on his arm. "You know, I was furious at you for leaving me alone in a bar," she said. A phone call had kept Mr. Sunquist from leaving, some warehouse on Gull Street wanting to be an artists' loft.

Mrs. Sunquist did not seem furious; she was smiling at her younger reflection. The girl on the couch didn't look furious. She looked like a stranded angel, patiently waiting on gravity's demise.

"Right about now, I was giving you five more minutes to walk through the door."

"You were very tolerant with me, Mrs. S."

But it wasn't tolerance that had kept her in her seat for an hour.

A little man entered the bar and approached her. He wore a suit and tie, but badly. They were not what he was used to. He was not yet thirty, yet his scalp already showed through the down at the top of his head. A last bit of baby fat lent his eyes a squint when he smiled.

Mr. and Mrs. Sunquist hushed each other as the little man asked to sit. "He was very polite," Mrs. Sunquist recalled.

"He was scared of you," Mr. Sunquist chuckled. "Look how bald he's be-

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come in just a few years." Mr. Sunquist remembered the little man from their old neighborhood. He didn't remember the name. But the young man had existed at the periphery of Bobby Shelbourne's crew, Mr. Sunquist remembered that.

The Sunquists stifled giggles; Melanie let him buy her a glass of wine, though a glass stood half full at her elbow. She smiled at him as he fumbled at his introduction: Roger J. Swann, from a local desk of one of the international banks in Kleege's Beach. He never mentioned the old bungalows they had all shared on the beach, or the parties at Sonny's and at Bobby Shelbourne's apartment. He seemed happy in his role as stranger. In the presence of Melanie Everett, he might have been happy with anything.

The story as the Sunquists retold it to each other over the years had this desperate little man crawling into Melanie's lap. In fact, Swann never looked down at her open décolletage. His eyes were glued to her face. Every smile she made brought one in return. Her jokes made him laugh, and cover his mouth with his palm.

Melanie Everett asked him about himself. (Surely, she was being wicked!) Roger Swann was awed by her consideration. He grew flustered. He might have gone.

Melanie had this thing she did, this nervous laugh, as if she were the one who needed reassurance. Swann happily reassured her.

He told her about his work. Roger Swann was a programmer for the bank. "More like a game warden," he confided. "The programs do their own programming anymore. I just make sure they remember who they're working for."

Melanie laughed and put her hand up to her mouth. Roger Swann did the same. His eyes squinted down to little black points of happiness and moist shine.

Mr. Sunquist remembered Roger Swann. What a perfect foil he had been! He had missed his chance with Melanie at her twentieth birthday party. Look at him now—Mr. Sunquist could see the romantic fantasies fill his mind. "Enjoy it while you can," he chuckled.

One of the bartenders swung up the counter to let someone through. It was Bill Sunquist. He looked sheepish at first: He saw the clock above the bar and lowered his head and sighed. Then he saw the fervent little banker paying for Melanie's wine. This wicked leer kinked up the corner of his mouth.

Roger Swann never looked up, but Melanie did. Melanie said not a word as Bill Sunquist pushed by the two of them to take a seat on her left. Roger Swann was explaining the intricacies of Darwinian programming strategies. She seemed perfectly content to listen.

Mr. Sunquist remembered looking across at Melanie as Swann continued on about his work—*Are you looking for a job? What?* That's when he saw the amusement in her eyes. What a hoot this would be!

Bill Sunquist had a low boredom tolerance. There was only so much arbitrage trading and Darwinian software business to put up with before the joke ran out. Just for fun, he leaned across Roger's lap to argue with the waiter over the provenance of a gram of hashish.

"A spicy aroma of ginger," he read off the thumb-sized packet. "Redolent with earth musk and cardamom." Bill Sunquist opened it up for the maître d' to smell. "Would you describe that as 'redolent with earth musk and cardamom'?"

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The waiter looked at him long, a patronizing half-smile at the corner of his mouth. "We have a fine roan from Lebanon, with the elusive sweetness of late-harvest Riesling. Would you care to try that?"

"For my friend here." Mr. Sunquist remembered smiling down on Roger Swann. "For my friend." He remembered Roger Swann smiling back, confused and helpful and friendly as a pup. Bill Sunquist nodded across at Melanie. "Are you ready, *mi amor?* To Grandmother's house we go."

A priceless moment—Roger Swann turns his hopeful gaze back to Melanie. But Melanie is already moving past Bill for the open side of the bar.

Looking on from the darkness of their alcove, Mr. Sunquist could not help an ornery cackle. Ohh, he was terrible in those days!

They shook hands like gentlemen, give them that. Such was his commitment to sportsmanship that Roger Swann would have shaken Melanie's hand as well, but something made her turn away at the last moment. She stumbled into Bill, pushed past him blindly for the door.

Mr. Sunquist had to bite his fist to keep from laughing at the ridiculous tableau—Roger Swann, staring after them with three half-empty wine glasses on the bar and a look in his eyes like crushed violets.

Mrs. Sunquist squeezed his arm the way she always did when she was trying to make him behave. Oh, but her eyes shone. Even before she said it, he knew that she must be exulting in their perversity.

He might have skipped the proposal at this point. He had no need to fight the crush of other Sunquists, all hurrying out to see the same thing. He had seen what he wanted. Only courtesy made him remind his wife why they had come here in the first place.

"Right out there on the porch," he told her, "I'm proposing marriage to you."

Mrs. Sunquist had her eyes on Roger Swann. He had to nudge her for attention. "You still want to see this, don't you?" She laughed then, the way she always did. She assured him that she was all right, as if he had asked.

They had managed to snag a prime parking spot from the clutches of their own grasping iterations. From here, the Sunquists looked on as Bill Sunquist dug in his coat pocket and came up with something small, wrapped in velvet and chintz.

Even now, Mr. Sunquist remembered the moment. He remembered the way Melanie drew her hands to her face, and looked from his hands to his face as if to catch him in a lie. He remembered the feel of her fingers in his palm as she took the box, the little breath as she opened it and turned the ring toward the light.

Mr. Sunquist tried to remember what was going through the mind of the young man on the porch. Maddeningly, all he could think of was Roger Swann. People like that, you humiliate them and they think they can win you over. Any minute, he had expected the door to open and a myopic smile to appear beneath the wall sconce.

The realization made him anxious for something to say. "We look like we're very much in love." In truth, Mr. Sunquist had no idea what people in love were supposed to look like.

"I hate to tell you what I was really thinking." Mrs. Sunquist gave a glance over her shoulder. There was another couple in a car just a few spaces down. She leaned forward so they would not hear what she had to say. "I had just downed a glass-and-a-half of cheap white wine and all I could think about was finding someplace to pee."

"And, of course, you couldn't go back in the bar—"

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"Roger Swann was in there."

Mr. Sunquist found himself roaring. Mrs. Sunquist hushed him; she was a shy person by nature, and people might be listening. That made him laugh even harder.

The couple in the next car turned to see what was funny, but he didn't care. He knew those people well enough, he had nothing to prove to them.

They would be a couple in their thirties. They would be having a conversation very much like this one. A little breathless, the woman hints to her husband how these past fifteen years are as much a product of bladder control as love.

Perhaps she intends a joke. Perhaps an insult. Things are not so good between the man and the woman at this point in their marriage. The woman realizes this too late, and starts to back up and stammer.

To himself, the man thinks . . .

"Romance is one of those things that doesn't really work as a first-hand experience. Why we come back here every year, I imagine."

"What?" Mrs. Sunquist looked up at him. "You must have heard that somewhere."

It was not an especially generous thought, Mr. Sunquist realized. He was a little surprised he had said it out loud. More surprised how much he believed it to be true.

"We should move on," he said. "Let these kids have their privacy."

She put a hand to his wrist as he reached for the touchpad. "One more minute," she whispered. "They're almost done." She stared so intently that Mr. Sunquist wondered what she was looking at. Her head tilted to her right, and her mouth gaped in little-girl awe.

"I was a beauty in my day, wasn't I?" She smiled a little, as if to make a joke, but she could not hide the shine in her eyes.

It must be the baby, he thought. The baby makes her sentimental. A half-dozen things came to mind. All had the antiseptic cheer of a get-well card. He squeezed her hand. "Steady on, old girl. Let's not break the mood here."

Mrs. Sunquist nodded. Of course, of course. Suddenly, she was laughing again. She waved all his worried looks aside. Perhaps she had been having him on after all.

A few minutes further up the road awaited the Hotel Mozambique they had known as youngsters. White stucco bungalows crowded protectively around a medium-sized black bottom pool. They opened at the far end to show the sky at evening.

Mr. Sunquist got them the room they always asked for, looking out through the top of a date palm toward Mer Noire.

Mrs. Sunquist pushed open the window. A blood-warm breeze came in off the bay, sour with brine, pungent with road tar from the asphalt bike paths just beyond the courtyard.

"What was the name of that soap opera they filmed down the beach?" Mrs. Sunquist eased herself into the corner of the sill, hugging herself in the dreamy light that spilled through the palms just beyond.

"Indigo Something," Mr. Sunquist recalled. "*Shades of Indigo,* I think."

"They filmed right outside my window for six months when I lived with Bobby Shelbourne. The next year, the production company followed their expanding time signature up the beach and filmed the actors playing opposite their own earlier iterations. You remember that?"

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Mr. Sunquist said he did. This was a lie—Mr. Sunquist had no money for television when he was young—but all lies are sweet in La Jetée in August.

Mrs. Sunquist smiled at him, knowing and unconcerned. She led him by the hand to the bed. They made love in the cool shade of the whitewashed room—sweetly, awkwardly, stopping to see if everything was all right with the baby.

Later, as the heat of the day enveloped them, Mr. Sunquist pressed his arm around Mrs. Sunquist's shoulders and drew her close. They had not slept this way since they were newlyweds. Her hair had the soapy smell of newborn babies. The scent of it followed him into his dreams.

Here was Melanie Everett, the girl that would be his wife. He remembered her all golden under the sun, bashful but hardly uncertain. She had perfected the fascination that goes with being the second-prettiest girl at every party. Boys became aware of her in stages, the way they became aware of the first hit pop tune of the summer.

Forthright kids like Bob Shelbourne were always going to get around to Melanie Everett, right after they investigated the fulsome charms of Jenn LeMel, or the Maynard sisters. Shy kids always thought of her beauty as their secret. Being shy, they assumed their secret safe.

Lying beside her now, Mr. Sunquist dreamed not of his wife, but of his friends—the things they would tell each other. What did they think when they heard Melanie Everett had gone home with him? His had been an epic battle, as pure as a fairy tale. A rival had been vanquished. A maiden won. Being a man living at a certain moment in history, he had learned to savor these stories. Nothing is more vivid than a moment re-lived, he would say. Not even the moment itself.

The heat of the day had broken when Mr. Sunquist shook off the last of his dreams. The breeze had shifted around to come in from the south, from the future-side of the bay. Mrs. Sunquist said she could lie beneath the billowing curtains all night long. Perhaps Mrs. Sunquist still had doubts. If so, Mr. Sunquist hardly heard. He was planning their road trip.

He asked Mrs. Sunquist if she remembered the first time they made love.

"Of course I do." As indignant as she could manage.

"We had to take a blanket out to Mourning Shoals because your boyfriend was setting up your apartment for a surprise birthday party. You remember? And the fog rolled in so we almost couldn't find the truck, and then we got back an hour and a half after the party started?"

Mrs. Sunquist laughed, embarrassed. She remembered.

"You know," Mr. Sunquist said, "that's one place you and I have never gone back to."

"Oh, William. No!"

"It's a birthday party. It would be easy to slip in. And we had such a time that night."

Mrs. Sunquist touched his cheek. "You remember everything so perfectly," she said.

Something in her tone struck Mr. Sunquist as odd, so that he smiled and frowned at the same time. Perhaps his wife had not enjoyed the scene in the bar as he expected. Time for something frivolous, he decided. Pieczyznski, the chess master, perhaps. Or maybe they could see *Shades of Indigo* filming up at the old Harbinger Hotel.

He didn't tell her what he planned. He thought to surprise her. He ex-

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pected that she might even mention these places herself, but the scene in the bar had left Mrs. Sunquist in some reverie of her own.

Seven miles up the highway, and as many years further back, Mr. Sunquist found a neighborhood he recognized. Lola's Bookstore was just up the street in a bus barn it shared with an equity waiver theater. If someone could give them the local date and time, they would pin down the moment of their arrival.

The Sunquists discovered a young couple hiding among the shadows of Ciriquito Street. Mr. Sunquist called to them. The boy glanced back at him—*what?* The girl turned around to see what he was looking at. The Sunquists realized they were looking at themselves.

Mr. Sunquist knew immediately where they were. Somehow, they had stumbled onto Melanie Everett's twentieth birthday party. This was the night that she had ended her relationship with her boyfriend. The night that she had gone home with him.

Bill Sunquist and Melanie Everett stood in the shadow of a large real estate sign. The sign showed an artist's rendering of tennis courts, a condominium, a hotel complex.

The Ciriquito Street pier, where fishing boats still headed into the sun each morning, that was to be subsumed into a two-hundred slip marina. Bill Sunquist noticed none of this. The sign was nothing to him but cover. He had Melanie under his left arm and they were studying the beach-front apartment she shared with Bobby Shelbourne, the man who promised to love her, *"no matter how much she disappointed him."*

They were talking. The Sunquists were too far away to hear the words. No matter; the Sunquists had remembered this story to each other till they could mouth the words. Bill Sunquist and Melanie Everett had parked along Kleege's Beach and spent the afternoon under the tarp in the back of Bill Sunquist's two-ton army surplus lorry. Now she was late to her own birthday party. Late, and sunburned and sweaty and very guilty.

Mr. Sunquist thought of Pieczinski, the chess master. Well, they were here now. Whatever he had intended could wait until after. Mrs. Sunquist smiled, though she plainly was embarrassed. "William, I don't know about this."

"What are you worried about? You know how it turns out."

"I don't want to see this."

"You were asking if you were beautiful." He nodded toward their younger reflections. "Look at how young we are in this place."

"It's a world of ghosts," Mrs. Sunquist said to the car window. "I don't care how young they are."

Mr. Sunquist did not blame his wife for being negative. He ascribed her unease to Bobby Shelbourne's oppressive aura. Understandable, certainly. Bobby Shelbourne was a vegetarian and pathological spoilsport, one of those people who savored his slights. No wonder Mrs. Sunquist quailed at the memory of this night. He studied the girl standing under the real estate sign. Look at how frantic she is to make her story, he thought.

"The only way out is through," he told Mrs. Sunquist. And then: "Don't be scared." It was the sort of patronizing admonishment a six-year-old uses on a younger sibling.

Mrs. Sunquist pursed her lips with a moment's thought, then she nodded at an open curb down the block.

They pulled up in front of a shaded courtyard between two bungalows.

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Bill and Melanie had disappeared. Mr. Sunquist heard whispers and laughter though a screen of rust-colored bougainvillea. Up ahead was the ocean, and a small yard inside a rusted fence that separated the apartment from the beach. He heard flapping above his head. A banner cut from bed sheets stretched between a pair of upstairs windows. It read: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MELANIE. I LOVE YOU.

Mrs. Sunquist paused when she saw the painted bed sheet. "Really," she said. "Let's not do this." Just for a moment, she glanced back the way they had come. She might have been gauging her chances of making the street.

"Don't tell me you feel guilty." Mr. Sunquist hooted. "Guilty for Bobby Shelbourne! Oh, wouldn't he love that."

"There's not enough people for us to slip in. Someone will recognize us. They'll know we came from down the beach."

Indeed, a young man with mild blue eyes had been stationed at the top of the stair to guard against crashers.

For one moment, Mr. Sunquist cringed as Roger Swann nodded down at them. He thought of the humiliation Roger had suffered in Sonny's—wondered if he might have to answer for it. But no, that bar scene was seven years in Roger Swann's future. Swann gave them only a look of rueful curiosity. He nodded toward the next bungalow over, where he imagined they had come from. He asked if they were here to complain about the noise.

Mr. Sunquist was thinking up a suitable lie when Melanie Everett stepped out onto the landing.

She had this nervous laugh as a kid, which was odd. Watching her, Mr. Sunquist suddenly realized that Melanie herself was not nervous at all. The laugh was for the benefit of whoever she spoke to. It worked to spectacular effect.

Suddenly, Roger Swann was over his terror of pretty girls. He leaned forward to hear her as she asked him something under the music. Smiling, he answered.

Mrs. Sunquist took her husband by the wrist. "You know what he's telling me?" Even now the boy's words affected her. "He's telling me how Bobby's been waiting for me since four. And then he tells me he himself has been waiting for me all his life."

"Aww." Mr. Sunquist gave her a look of arch sentimentality. Together, they went "Aww," loud enough to attract the gaze of the kids on the stair. He thought that Melanie regarded them with some look of secret humor. Who knew what she was really thinking. Mr. Sunquist imagined pretty girls used this look when they could think of nothing to say.

Roger got a peck on the cheek for his sweetness. Melanie disappeared into the party without a backward glance, but that was enough for Roger Swann. The Sunquists were forgotten. He slicked the thinning wedge of hair back from his forehead. He followed after her. The Sunquists trailed a short distance behind.

One thing that Mr. Sunquist remembered about Bobby Shelbourne's apartment, it was dangerous to show too much interest in any bit of ornament.

Bobby Shelbourne lived in a museum of Melmac ice cream dishes, mismatched kitchen chairs, and determinedly outdated electronic entertainment gear. Every one with a little story about where it had been found, and how much it was really worth to some mythical dealer in garage-sale lamps, or kitchen Formica, or digital video downloaders.

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A whir-sound passed by overhead. A scale model of the Hindenburg was making stately passage from the living room to the kitchen. Normally, Bobby would be following it around, pointing out the hand-painted swastika on the tail rudder. But the mood had gone out of him today.

He saw Melanie and his pale blue eyes went all weepy and proud. His pouty lip grew heavier than it was already. If Bobby had promised to forgive Melanie no matter what, he had not promised to make it easy. He would not even acknowledge Melanie till she took his arm and made him face her.

Someone put on music, too loud to hear her speak. No matter, Mr. Sunquist could tell by her rueful demeanor that she was making her story.

What was it he and Melanie had decided? Yes, he remembered now—Melanie had gone down the T-Line Highway to visit the iterations of her own childhood. The Feynman diagram in her glove compartment contained too many streets between there and here that had yet to be built. She'd gotten confused coming back.

Mr. Sunquist spotted himself over by the kitchen door, watching. Melanie had asked Bill to stay away while she tried to explain things to her boyfriend. Of course there was no way Bill Sunquist would do that—let her explain things to her boyfriend? So that they might smooth things out? Melanie had been naïve to think that he would.

It hardly mattered; Bobby Shelbourne saw him over Melanie's head. Shelbourne smiled.

"It's you, isn't it." His eyes were luminous with anger.

Bill made no attempt to deny it. He smiled his most irritating smirk, motioned to Shelbourne in that silent gesture every young man knows—hands out, fingers cupping palms in ironic invitation: *Come on then. Come get some.*

Melanie pulled him back by the arm, and for one moment Bobby Shelbourne let her. The pause was so brief that Billy Sunquist had barely noticed. Twenty-five years older, Mr. Sunquist grinned: Look how he glances around for a way out!

"You were never no street brawler, Bobby." Slipping into a voice he had not spoken in since he was a vain young man. "You were never nothing like what I was." Even now, Mr. Sunquist lived for these moments. Anymore, the stakes would be infinitely higher than a broken nose. But that desperate calculation remained eternal: Pride? Or survival?

Melanie saw her chance to wedge between them. The two boys clenched each other tight against her. Mr. Sunquist remembered the collision between his belly and her skinny rib cage. He remembered the sound she made as the breath went out of her.

Billy Sunquist might have reached for her. He always told himself that he would have, if only Bobby had not started in the way he did.

"Look at her," Bobby hissed. "Now you've done it. Now you've hurt her." Nobody put Billy Sunquist on the defensive.

Bill Sunquist took a hunk of genuine 100 percent Rayon bowling shirt and laughed in Bobby Shelbourne's face. *Nice try.* All these years away, Mr. Sunquist still felt Bobby Shelbourne's cheekbones beneath his knuckles. The two of them waltzed around till they fell back against the Formica tabletop, slamming the blender and liquor and ice onto the floor.

Melanie wasn't really so damaged. Mr. Sunquist found her, easing herself back against the refrigerator. Her shirt was soaked watery green from a half-bottle of Midori, but she seemed all right.

Roger Swann had come over to help her up, but she had more than pity

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on her mind. She took his elbow and pointed toward the mess in the kitchen.

Like any young man of experience, he knew the risks of stepping into someone else's fight. He thumbed the side of his mouth in an expression of unease. But Melanie had this unassailable sense of mission when the chips were down. It animated her. It swept up everyone around her. Roger found his resolve; together, they waded in. Each grabbed an elbow, or a shoulder, and yanked backward.

Bill Sunquist had Bobby Shelbourne's face against the refrigerator. Mr. Sunquist dimly remembered the conversation between them, something about eating the refrigerator's door handle. Oh well.

The next moments came vivid, but in flashes, like snapshots: A hand on his arm. A face coming in at him. He remembered placating words, but his blood was up. He swung back his left hand and connected solidly with hard bone, right at somebody's hairline. The face went away

Bill Sunquist turned back for Bobby Shelbourne only to find that Melanie had got between them. The fight was over.

He called to her. He nodded toward the door, *Let's go.* But Melanie was angry, she ignored him.

Shelbourne fixed his eyes on her. Even as his friends moved him off to the far side of the kitchen, he spoke to her. Bobby asked if she'd been hurt, was there anything he could do?

"You know I always took care of you," Bobby Shelbourne called to her. "I may not be exciting, but I'm always there."

Oh, he was good. Anyone else would have blasphemed and threatened.

Melanie looked big-eyed and stricken. This was the moment she had chewed her knuckles over all the way from Kleege's Beach. Bill Sunquist, too. By the look on his face, he might have swallowed an ice tray. He was a street kid, after all. Smooth talk was not where he excelled.

Melanie wavered. She started to raise her hands the way she did when she was miserable and all out of words.

But here was Roger Swann, leaning forward with his hand to his forehead. Blood was seeping through his fingers and plopping in the wet muck. He wobbled on his knees and Melanie took him. Bobby's appeals to her conscience would have to wait.

Bobby smiled, sure. "You're doing the right thing," he told her. "Take care of Roger. We'll talk later. When you have a minute."

Mr. Sunquist had not seen this side of Melanie since they were married. She could be magnificent, couldn't she? He marveled: Bobby Shelbourne is two months from buying up this whole block of apartments for his daddy's marina project, look at how he stammers before her.

His wife felt the weight of his consideration. For one moment, she was the girl she had been. Self-possessed and certain. Perhaps she knew what he was thinking. She would have said something to him, but Melanie Everett came this way. Roger Swann bumped along in her wake. Mr. and Mrs. Sunquist stood up to make room for him on the couch.

She was saying something under her breath, half to Roger, half to herself: "Limo." It was Bill Sunquist's street name. "Limo, Limo, Limo," she said—eventually winding up with, "Damn him." Melanie tipped Roger's head back. She squinted against the bad party light. The blood was starting to roll down his nose. She dipped a kitchen towel in the punch bowl and dabbed it off.

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"It was just a wild punch." Roger's hand came up, a gesture of indifference. "He hit me left-handed anyway. Probably doesn't even know he did it."

"Him and those stupid rings he wears. He's been dying to use them on someone."

Roger was silent for a few dabs. Mr. Sunquist could see him working his way up to something. "You really have to go with him?"

For one moment, Melanie looked up at the Sunquists with this exasperated grimace—*you explain it for him*. Mr. Sunquist felt his wife's fingers clutch his, stricken. But it was an illusion. Melanie's look was intended for anyone within earshot—anyone who knew what it was to be the second-prettiest girl at every party. For one night, she had her pick between princes. How could she explain to the nicest kid in the room what this meant?

"I'm going home with Limo." She squeezed Roger's blood into the punch bowl. "I really am."

Roger Swann shook his head, whatever. "We'll see each other again," he said.

Mr. Sunquist nudged Mrs. Sunquist. He raised his chin at the boy. "Sonny's Bar," he whispered in her ear. "This is what he was thinking when he saw you alone in Sonny's Bar."

He laughed so loud that both the people on the couch turned back in curiosity. He didn't care. He waved them back to their conversation. "This is too good," he hissed.

Mrs. Sunquist was supposed to laugh along at times like this. She bit her lip and looked down at her shoes. "How do you do it?" She sounded breathless, she might have been amazed. "I see the time passing and it makes me so weary. And you just keep getting angrier. Don't you ever feel any pity? Or regret?"

He put out his hands, he smiled. He figured there had to be a joke in here somewhere. "We are what we've always been. Isn't that enough?" It was the only explanation he could think of.

"Poor Roger," she said.

To himself, he thought, *Somebody has to lose.*

Did she know what he was thinking? Suddenly, she had this look on her face, still and deliberate and calm. It was the face he recognized from the taxi drivers who came to pick him up from bars. Whatever she saw in his eyes only made her sigh.

"Time for us to go," Mrs. Sunquist said.

"We haven't seen the end yet. Remember? I sweep out of the crowd and pick you up, and Bobby Shelbourne—"

"You know what happens. You take me home with you. We spend the next twenty-five years coming back to see it all again. I have something I want to remember."

Here was a phrase Mr. Sunquist would think back on: *I have something I want to remember.*

In all the years he had come back to La Jetée, Mr. Sunquist had never felt the need to remember anything. Memories were for people who didn't come to La Jetée. Memories were for the ones Mr. Sunquist imagined in his audience.

Evening was coming on as they pulled onto Ciriquito Street. The shutters on all the beach bungalows and flower kiosks had opened to the first breath of an evening breeze. The air was dense with the musk of orchids.

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This was five years earlier; La Jetée was a strip of bungalows, caught between the highway and the beach. Mr. Sunquist remembered thin times. The tourists had bypassed La Jetée for the more developed resorts down the beach. The only money in the town came from the nurseries across the highway, and service jobs in the hotels south of Kleege's Beach. Every evening, the streetcars would be full of people in half-undone housecleaning uniforms. Head waiters from the lesser restaurants would hang from the doors, swigging pilfered wine bottles and calling out insults as they passed each other.

And everyone ended up in the tiny patio at Sonny's.

Here was the Sonny's that the Sunquists never tired of. Sonny's Seafood Chowder Bar was an open courtyard, an old banyan tree, gnarled as knuckles, a cast concrete bar patterned with ridiculous wood grain. Sonny Himself was whip-thin these days. With ashy skin and freckles and a wide grin that seemed somehow more charming for its insincerity.

He was not charming tonight. He was eating Spanish peanuts out of the bar dishes, which is what he did when he was nervous. His eyes were like black ice and he kept checking his watch.

A door behind the bar led out into an alley that ran from the street to the beach. People passed in and out carrying guitars and tambales and a set of wide-mouthed clay jugs, each one painted with "Jug Breakers" on the side—Bobby Shelbourne's band.

Sonny glared at every kid who passed through that door. He pointed to his watch. They scuttled off to the stage like roaches caught in a kitchen light.

Bobby Shelbourne had played here every Thursday night for most of the summer, but anyone could see the blow-up that was coming. Sonny Scorzy was a congenial host, but he was hell as an employer. He hated lateness, even when he was paying no money. Bobby Shelbourne had a star's concept of time, even though he made no money. Sonny Scorzy hated that.

On this night, only one person was exempt from Sonny's evil eye. Even now, Mr. Sunquist lost his breath at the sight of her. That golden hair. Those exotic eyes. Sonny had saved her his own chair, right at the end of his beloved bar. She took it with this air of modest expectancy—she was gracious and patient as Sonny wiped off the peanut skins and beer. But it never occurred to her to sit elsewhere.

Mr. Sunquist still loved the way she said things and then covered her mouth with her hand, as if surprised by her own sense of humor. He loved the careful, prim way she crossed her ankles. He loved her dubious smile as young Billy Lee Sunquist slid in next to her.

Mr. Sunquist wondered how much it would take to impress a girl like Melanie Everett now. How much had he spent on that account rep from Loach & Widell? Not including lunch at that expensive bistro she had recommended? Billy Lee Sunquist had held his knowledge cheaply when he'd lived in La Jetée, and given it away for the asking.

"Here," Billy Lee said to the young woman struggling with the fruit that Sonny had put out for her. "You wanna know how to eat a mango, I'll show you how to eat a mango."

"I'm with someone," she said, and nodded toward a little door into the alley, where Bobby Shelbourne and his Jug Breakers were tuning up.

Billy Lee Sunquist laughed at the caution on her face. He held up his hands. "I'm just showing you how to eat a mango." He took the fruit from

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her hand, salted it, dusted it with cayenne pepper, and slipped it down his throat. He licked his fingers one by one and gave her a lascivious grin.

Mrs. Sunquist gave her husband a secret smile. "You remember what you said to me?"

Mr. Sunquist claimed he did not. Mrs. Sunquist said she did not believe he didn't remember. Out on the patio, Billy Lee Sunquist whispered in Melanie Everett's ear. She grew big-eyed and aghast. She gave Billy Lee a slap on the shoulder, and then said something under her breath that made him laugh and made her cover her mouth with her hand.

Mr. Sunquist gripped his wife's hand. This trip was already working changes on her. That sturdy quiet she had acquired over the lean years of their middle age, that had melted to the shyness he remembered so well. He would have shared this moment with the world.

Bobby came out with his nickel-topped Dobro guitar. Roger Swann hunkered down next to him with some squat Caribbean drum between his knees. They were a team in those days, Bobby and Roger. If Bobby played guitar, Roger would be there with the drums.

There was this trombone player that neither of the Sunquists remembered. He nudged Bobby Shelbourne. He motioned toward his girl and the young man sitting next to her.

Perhaps he had a look of mischief. If so, he would be disappointed. Bobby Shelbourne saw Bill Sunquist leaning close to Melanie. He grinned and shook his finger, school-marm style. Billy laughed. Melanie gave him a girl-slug and nodded toward her boyfriend on the stage—*See? I told you.*

Everybody knew each other at Sonny's. Everything was easy.

The music started. Jug band blues, simple and irresistible. Everybody on the patio pushed forward under the gnarled banyan tree. They sang along to the songs they knew. They shoulder-danced to the songs they didn't know. They ate mangoes and papayas, and drank fermented *cidra* from terra-cotta jugs.

Then it came time for this walking blues, "Limousine Blues." Billy Lee Sunquist liked this song. He wasn't sure yet, but he was thinking about incorporating it as his personal theme.

He threw back his head at the first note. His face split into a wide grin. "My song!" he cried. "Bobby remembered my song!"

Melanie was still wiping mango pulp from her fingers as he took her hand. "Ohh no," she was saying as he led her out in front of the band. "Ohh no."

There, in front of God and her boyfriend and everybody they knew, Billy Lee Sunquist and Melanie Everett danced some imaginary swing that they knew only from watching Tex Avery cartoons.

Mr. Sunquist felt his wife draw near. She asked him if he knew why they were here. He put his arm around her; he knew. "This is a cute moment together. Look at us there." He laughed at his younger iteration. Billy Lee Sunquist was barely more than a slouch and a lazy smile. "We were so poor," he said.

"You might have been a billionaire for the way you acted. I was so impressed with you." She looked so long and hard at the young couple that she might have been trying to imprint this scene forever in her mind. "This is the moment I fell in love," she said.

Mr. Sunquist tried to remember the moment, what he was thinking. He couldn't. Maybe he too had been in love. Mr. Sunquist laughed as he realized it.

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* * *

As they walked out to the car, he offered to take her to see Pieczyznski, the chess master. But something had gone out of the mood. Perhaps this last moment had been a miscalculation? Mr. Sunquist decided they'd seen enough for their first day of vacation. He turned the car back up the highway for their hotel.

Mrs. Sunquist asked him about Roger Swann—back in that first iteration of Sonny's, he should have recognized them. It had been just a few years since they'd all seen each other, had they changed so much?

They fell into a foolish argument about Roger Swann, and why hadn't he recognized them? Mr. Sunquist wanted to laugh, except that underneath it all, the argument wasn't foolish. And somehow it wasn't really about Roger Swann.

Arguing, they missed the Hotel Mozambique. They drove south, beyond even the present iteration of La Jetée. Mr. Sunquist looked around to realize they had gone down the road, on to South Beach—into the future. They became quiet as they realized that nothing around them looked familiar.

No one ever came out to this end of the T-Line highway. Like one of those weighty popular art novels, South Beach was a place on every tongue, but rarely experienced in person. Everybody knew someone who had risked all to catch some glimpse of themselves in a new and unimagined place in their own lives. Always some friend, some relative. Never the person telling the story. Always the tale had some ghastly, amusing outcome.

They were well and truly lost when they reached the first town south of the Present Iteration. Mrs. Sunquist hesitated, but they were running low on power, and she had to use the bathroom again.

"Let's do it," cried Mr. Sunquist, his middle-aged timbre catching some of that old devilish tone. "Let's take a chance and see what we run into down here in The Future."

Mrs. Sunquist looked uneasy. But she would not be outdone by her husband. Laughing together, they swung off the T-Line to get directions from the future back to the present.

Another building cycle was coming to La Jetée. All of the old orchid stands that had been on Noon Street and then replanted on Meridian Street were being uprooted again for a tract of old-style bungalow rows. The artists' conception reminded Mr. Sunquist of places he had lived. He wondered if this would be one of his investments.

No mention of the temporal anomaly. Was that no longer considered a draw? The only connection to the town they had left back in the gloom of fog and quantum wave-functions was a tag at the bottom of the sign:

SERIOUS ONLY
ENQUIRE WITH MR. ROBERT SHELBOURNE.
LA JETÉE

"Look at this," Mrs. Sunquist said, "They're even tearing down the buildings I hated to make way for new."

Mr. Sunquist knew he should be irate. Bobby Shelbourne hustled his phony nostalgia in the one place where nostalgia was useless. Somehow, he could do nothing but envy the man's gall.

They found an open-air market down the street. Palm fronds covered the porch, implying some sort of tropical *oeuvre.* Nearer the road were the hydrogen pumps, and electrical-charge outlets, and gasoline for the hybrids.

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As Mr. Sunquist started into the hydrogen lane, his wife grabbed his wrist and pointed across the street.

Their own car was parked at the curb, as if the occupants had gone for a walk over the chalk-white dunes to the ocean.

The Sunquists stared in astonishment. It was indeed their car, only the paint had faded to a dried-out coral. The seats had been left to the salt air and the sun till they had rotted open.

Someone had half-pulled an old beach blanket across the over-ripened seat cushions. An insignia on the blanket commemorated the Mer Noire regatta, fourteen years hence. The blanket looked as if it had been in the sun a couple of years even beyond that.

Mr. Sunquist thought for a moment. He realized what it had to mean. "It's our car all right, but we've passed it on to our child. This is just the sort of thing we would do."

Mrs. Sunquist looked doubtful. "Sixteen years from now? We'll have this car sixteen years from now?"

"It surely wouldn't be *us*." Mr. Sunquist cast a melodramatic stare toward Mrs. Sunquist. "Are we down on the beach somewhere? Should we go look?"

Mrs. Sunquist had given over the need to match her husband, dare-for-dare. "Let's just get some power and go," she said.

Mr. Sunquist wanted to egg her on a little. "Are you sure? We might be out there. On the beach. Living."

"This isn't funny," she said. "Let's just get the power and go."

Mr. Sunquist might have pushed a little harder but for the baby.

"You're lucky," he told her. He went up to pay for the fuel. She followed along to find a bathroom.

Around the corner from the pump island was a fruit stand and a cashier. As they approached, they heard a gravelly voice. "You know what you put on those? No, not sugar." Chesty laughter. "Thing's already sweet. Why would you put sugar on it? No, you know what they do in Mexico? They put salt on their mangos. A little cayenne pepper. Here."

Mr. and Mrs. Sunquist traded looks. An afternoon of chasing the ghosts of memory had left them unprepared for their role as someone else's ghost. They asked each other in that wordless language of married couples if they should go, but neither of them moved.

Mr. Sunquist felt his throat dry up. He thought for a moment. Was he sure he wanted to see himself like this? He grew impatient with his own timidity. What would happen, anyway? Would they blow up? Some sort of mutual annihilation, as if they were both opposing nuclear particles?

They stepped into the back of the cashier's line as casually as they could manage.

He was with a young girl. She had caramel-colored hair, like Mrs. Sunquist's had been when she had been a student. That same lithe waist. Those legs.

This is my daughter, Mr. Sunquist realized. The lust in him should have shamed him, but it merely made him furtive.

The store clerk flipped a light on so the old man could see what he was doing with that mango. A reflection appeared in the counter glass. Mr. Sunquist stared in fascination at the face of a tired satyr.

"We were such scoundrels when we were your age."

"Who's that?" the young woman frowned at the yellow fruit coming apart in her fingers. Her mind was a million years down the T-Line Highway.

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"Here. Let me show you something. Over here to the northwest." He was so casual about the way he put his arm around the girl's waist. He aimed her toward a dark smudge along the knife-edge of the horizon. It was the most natural thing in the world.

"Who were you such scoundrels with, Billy?"

"If you look over this way," the old man said, "you can see the actual heat death of the universe." He was trying hard to instill his voice with a sense of wonder that life had not held for him in a very long time. The young woman followed his arm.

Mr. Sunquist was shocked at the resemblance she had to his wife. The dark, sloe eyes, the long, caramel-blond hair, the mobile mouth.

"It looks more like fog," she observed with adolescent irony.

"Can't see it with the naked eye. Somebody set a radio telescope pointing that way. Came back with dead air. Nothing."

The girl nodded. She understood: The cosmic background radiation. It was supposed to be evenly distributed throughout the universe. "Gee, that's interesting." She slurped mango slices.

The old man leaned close as if he wanted to steal a kiss. The girl smiled back at him, *What?* The soft light of her trust set him back. He looked away down the beach, as if uncertain what to do.

She asked him what he was thinking. He ran his hand up and down her arm, elbow to shoulder as he considered his answer.

"I was thinking of a moment from my life a long time ago," he answered. "I was on a patio, dancing with a girl who looked very much like you. We were both a little drunk, and her boyfriend was playing for us, and everyone was friends, you know? Just. Friends. And right now, I was thinking that may have been the sweetest moment of my life."

"It must be nice," the girl offered, "having a lifetime of memories like that. I wish I had one moment I could look back on."

The old Sunquist laughed, shook his head. "No, it's terrible," he said. "You spend the rest of your life trying to find that moment again, and it's never where you thought." He paused, as if he'd only just heard his own words. "It's amazing what a person will do to recapture one moment of peace. Amazing and terrible."

Something in his tone made the girl back away. But somehow she was still in his arms, and in turning, she had presented her face to him.

He kissed her hard on the mouth. The girl pushed him back. For a moment, her chin bunched up and her cheeks reddened as if she might cry, or pummel the old man to the ground.

"Dammit," she said. "*Damn* it." Her hands went up in exasperation. An impulse took hold of her. She ran up and slugged him in the arm, dared him to respond.

The old Sunquist could do nothing but stare at her in stupid love. A moment of silence, then she stalked away down the beach. He squeezed his lips between his fingers. He squinted in anguish. He paced around in a little circle of perplexity, so that Mr. Sunquist could not help feeling sorry for him.

He called after the girl, laughing heartily as if it had all been a joke; she made an obscene gesture over her shoulder.

The present-tense Mr. Sunquist became aware of a profound silence directly behind him. He waited as long as he could before turning around.

Mrs. Sunquist—Melanie—was gone.

He put his fingers to his nose the way he did whenever he had to steady

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his vision after too much bourbon. He thought, this is ridiculous. How can I be blamed for something that hasn't even happened yet? Our child isn't even born. I don't even know for certain it will be a girl.

But in his heart, he knew it was not ridiculous. He knew himself well enough to know it was entirely likely. He simply couldn't believe Mrs. Sunquist would not forgive him. He had been forgiven all his life, hadn't he?

He pushed himself up to the top of the sand dune and searched the beach. He saw the girl stalking away along a concrete sea wall, making angry little skips with her palm against the rough stone blocks.

He couldn't find Mrs. Sunquist anywhere.

He realized the old man was beside him. He wondered what he should do. He had heard of people meeting themselves, of course. One always heard stories. He just couldn't remember how any of those stories turned out.

When he could stand it no longer, he turned to the old man: "You know what you've done?" he asked.

The man looked shocked, like a theater patron suddenly addressed from the stage.

"You're not supposed to—"

"You couldn't keep your hands off your own daughter? Damn it."

In truth, he was not very angry. Mr. Sunquist was more overcome with weariness. In his weariness, he saw his older persona in a cool and distant light, the way one sees one's parents after a while. He wasn't addressing himself anymore. He was addressing a sad old man who had lost track of things somehow.

He crouched down to take the old man's hand. It was bloated, the skin shiny and taut. "I'm sorry," he said, "It's just—" He paused. How to put this? "That's our daughter. Do you understand? There are some things I just can't do. If I do these things, there will be no limits for me at all." He looked into the cracked old face for some sign he was getting through.

"*Daughter?* What do you take me for? That's not our daughter." The old man laughed. There was a certain malicious strain in the reedy voice. Even now, he wasn't so different. "We don't have a daughter. We have a son, Jeremy, but I haven't seen him in five years. You don't know this yet, do you? Sorry. Shouldn't have opened my mouth, I guess."

Mr. Sunquist sighed; of course, this man would know how Mr. Sunquist longed for a son. He would use that knowledge to win sympathy, emotional leverage. Mr. Sunquist wondered if this was the man he truly was destined to become. What a pathetic and self-serving old liar.

"Come on, now," he said as gently as possible. "I recognized her eyes. I know her cheekbones. The resemblance is too strong. You can't tell me this was just some kid you picked up."

The old satyr leaned close. Mr. Sunquist held his breath at the tang of stale bourbon. "Of course it looks like Melanie," he hissed through his gaping teeth. "It *is* Melanie."

Mr. Sunquist felt something clammy and soft in the pit of his stomach. "You're not supposed to . . ."

"I was lonely," he said. "Mrs. Sunquist left me a couple years ago—left us, I should say. Left us. I got my car, I took a ride down the T-Line Highway." The rheumy eyes squinted defiantly. "Look at you, you're so self-righteous. What are you doing here? Huh? What are *you* doing here?"

"You're lying." Mr. Sunquist backed away. Melanie had to be somewhere on this beach; she had been right behind him a moment ago. He called out

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for her, but his words were caught up in a sudden gust of wind and scattered across the beach like sea birds.

"Lying? To you? Why would I lie to *you,* of all people?"

Way down by the waterline, Mr. Sunquist saw the young girl his wife had been. She looked back at the sound of her name. Was that recognition in her eyes? Mr. Sunquist entertained the notion of following after her. But she was not his wife, and he was not really Billy Lee Sunquist. Not her Billy Lee Sunquist. She turned away up the beach even as he debated his next move, and then she was gone.

"I would know if you'd messed about in my past. Mrs. Sunquist—Melanie—would have said something."

"Times change. Have you talked to Melanie recently?"

"You can't just drive down the road and change my life. You can't *do* that."

"Screw your life. I was lonely."

"You can't do that," he repeated fervently, hopefully.

He left the old man on the top of the dune and started back for his car. He found it sitting quietly in its refueling lane. The passenger-side door remained slightly ajar, just as his wife had left it.

He walked out in the street and called for her. He had to be wrong. She was here somewhere. She was confused; maybe she hated him a little bit. But she was still his wife. He couldn't have changed time. One didn't do such things in La Jetée. It just wasn't done.

He ran down the street, backward in time, calling for her as he went. Among the empty cliffs where beach hotels and seafood restaurants and temporal observatories had once been, gulls cocked their heads to peer down at him.

He pulled up, gasping at the highway on-ramp. All right, he told himself. Something terrible had happened. But it wasn't too late to fix things. Melanie was still there for him. She was a little ways down the T-Line Highway, that was all.

He would find her as she had been. He would protect her from that sad old ghost. And she would love him more than ever. He would see to it. He would be good to her, and listen to what she said. He would love the woman she was *now.* And the memories of the people they had been? He would let them remain beautiful memories, nothing more.

Headlights rolled across his shoulders. He turned and stumbled. The car rolled right up to his knees. He thought he was dead.

The driver was a woman with shoulder-length caramel-colored hair and exotically slanted eyes. The passenger was a sad-eyed little man. He stepped out to help Mr. Sunquist off the pavement.

"Are you all right? We didn't even see you. We got lost coming up the T-Line Highway and missed our city. We're just trying to find our way out of here. Trying, you know, not to see more than we should. . . ."

Mr. Sunquist looked at his wife. Her face was clouded with blank concern for a stranger she had almost killed.

He raised his hands to plead with her through the windshield. He started to ask her, *Have I changed so much?*

"Roger," she said to her husband, "ask him if he needs to go to the doctor. He looks like he's in shock." She started to slip out from behind the wheel. Her husband waved her back in the car.

"Don't do that, Honey. Just stay there."

Mr. Sunquist saw by the way she moved that she was extremely pregnant.

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"Here." Roger Swann peeled a twenty-five dollar bill off his money clip and stuffed it in Mr. Sunquist's hand. "Go on now, fella." He glanced back at his wife in a meaningful way. "She's having a baby," Roger Swann confided. "I just want to keep her happy."

Mr. Sunquist looked down at the bill, wadded up in his palm. When he looked back, the Swanns were already driving away.

He wanted to say something, but he couldn't think what. He watched them pull around, back onto the T-Line Highway going south.

He ran back to the car. He used the twenty-five dollar bill to pay for his charge. The truth, he realized, was back in one of those cities along the beach. All he had to do was find where his life had diverged from its path—*find that moment of clarity*. Wasn't that what he'd always come back to La Jetée to do? He would make it right.

Fifteen minutes up the highway, the towers of La Jetée, like a city sculpted from thoroughly burned ash, rose in the heat of a morning Mr. Sunquist couldn't remember seeing.

He pulled off the highway and wept. O

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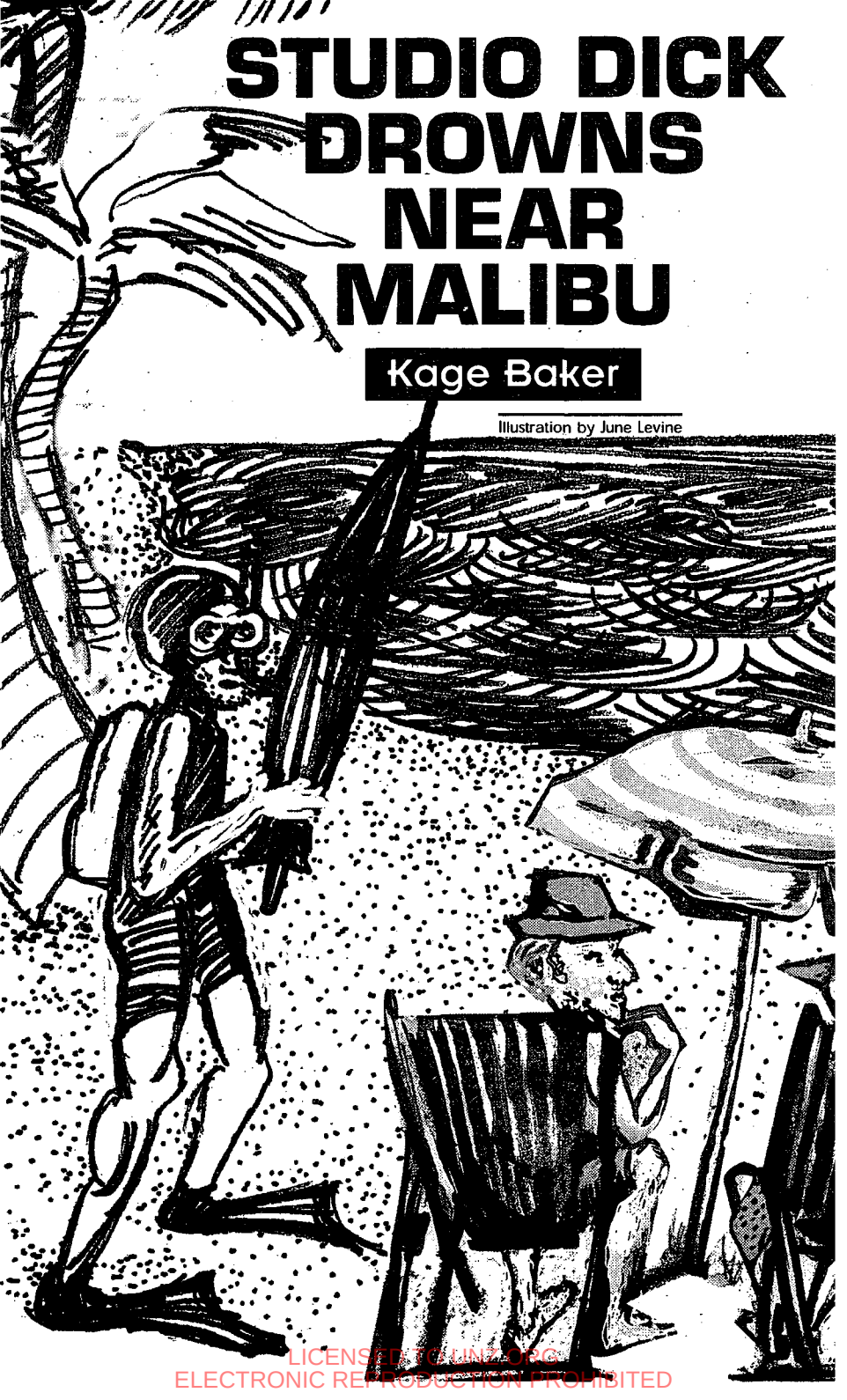
STUDIO DICK DROWNS NEAR MALIBU

Kage Baker

Illustration by June Levine



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Kage Baker's fourth novel, *The Graveyard Game,* is just out from *Harcourt Brace.* She returns to our pages with another tantalizing Company tale that explores the truth behind a mysterious twentieth century death.

It was time to die again.

Some of us don't like faking our deaths; you have a lot of fuss and worry over making it believable, and then you have to go off someplace else and start over again. I kind of enjoy it, though. In all the centuries I've been running around after things the Company wanted, shipping the loot of history up to their offices in the Future, I must have staged a dozen memorable demises. It's the closest a cyborg like me is ever going to get to the real thing, right? So why not make it stupendous, spectacular, colossal?

I've died even when I didn't strictly have to. In the old days you didn't need to die to assume a new identity, when the Company transferred you. Riding over the horizon was as good as riding off the edge of the world, and if you never came back most mortals assumed you'd died. You could become somebody else, somewhere else, and the chances were astronomical you'd ever meet a mortal who'd known you in your previous village. Even back then, though, cover could be blown: look at that Martin Guerre guy. That was why I always liked to play it safe and get myself a nice indisputable grave before I moved on to my next posting.

And when the twentieth century rolled around, with photos and Social Security numbers and drivers' licenses, and worse yet to come, it became more important than ever to die convincingly. No loose ends!

Still, I kind of hated leaving MGM, then of all times; it was 1938, for crying out loud. The best-ever year for movies was just around the corner. *Gone with the Wind* was already in pre-production, ditto *Ninotchka* and *The Wizard of Oz,* to name but a few. It was going to be swell, which in fact was why the Company was edging me out. They wanted to plant a Facilitator higher up in the studio, to be in a position to do things like grab lost footage from the cutting room floor. You wouldn't believe what mortals will pay for *Wizard of Oz* stuff by the twenty-fourth century.

And I'd been there too long, anyway. Joseph Denham, Studio Detective, had done a lot of favors and knew where a lot of bodies were buried. Too many people knew my name. Time to move on.

So I set up a death that would make the headlines. Well, *Variety's* headlines, at least.

Scuba diving hadn't arrived yet, back then before the war, but diving enthusiasts were already beginning to fool around with homemade apparatus and snorkels. I let all my mortal friends know I had a keen new hobby, and bored them with descriptions of the amateur dive equipment I was buying. Moved from my furnished room in Hollywood to a furnished room in Santa Monica so I could be closer to the sea. Let slip that I wasn't really all that good a swimmer. There were a few people at the studio already, Garbo among them, who'd have liked nothing better than to see me drown.

I met my fellow cyborg Lewis at Musso and Frank's for one last round of

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drinks while we went over what he'd tell the cops; that was Friday night. Saturday morning I was off to Santa Monica, where I parked my nice new Ford near the pier, bid it a regretful farewell, and carried my outsize duffel and striped umbrella to the nearest changing rooms.

Ten minutes later I was making my awkward way to the sea through all the other striped umbrellas, and, brother, was I a sight to behold. That was the idea, of course.

I had on a kind of tight union suit of black wool, with a hood over which I'd fitted a pair of goggles with the breathing tube and its little float clipped to the side. It would have been smarter to have waited to put on the rubber flippers until I was right at the water's edge, but more people noticed me floundering across the sand with them on. Picking the biggest, most brightly striped umbrella, I flop-flopped up to it and set down my things alongside.

The couple in beach chairs—old mortals, always pick old mortals for your witnesses because they watch everything and they love to testify to cops—stared at me in amazement as I opened my duffel and spread out a little beach mat. Humming to myself, I laid out a rolled-up towel and opened my striped umbrella and stuck it in the sand at a jaunty angle. Finally the old guy said, as I'd been waiting for him to say:

"Christ Almighty, what're you supposed to be? A frog?"

"What?" I looked over at him in apparent surprise. "Who, me?"

"He's some kind of diver, Harry," said the old lady.

"Well, you look like a frog to me," said the old man.

"That's right, ma'am, I'm a diver," I said, smiling at the old lady. "Not deep-sea, of course, I just sort of swim around the surface and look at stuff. It's a great hobby. You see a lot of fish."

"Is that so?" said the old lady. "Do you ever see any shipwrecks?"

"Oh, sometimes," I said, fitting my goggles over my eyes, "but you have to be really experienced to explore a wreck, and I've only been doing this for a few weeks. I'm not very good at it yet."

"Those things on your feet make you look like a frog," said the old guy.

"Yeah," I said, shading my eyes to look out at the ocean. "Say, look at those whitecaps! The water's pretty rough today, isn't it? I guess I won't stay out too long. Would you folks mind keeping an eye on my things, here, until I come back?" I leaned close to add, in a loud whisper, "My wallet's in my bag with my driver's license and everything, you know."

"Sure we will, mister," said the old lady. "You be careful, now."

"Gee, thanks," I said, and, squaring my shoulders, flopped-flopped on down to the water. Adults stared, children pointed, somebody's toddler shrieked with terror as I passed. I waded in and turned, once, to wave cheerfully at the old couple. Joseph Denham, confidant to the stars, makes his unforgettable exit!

I paddled around out there for a while, splashing like a clumsy mortal swimming, and I made sure they could see the yellow float bobbing like a lemon on the waves. Farther out, and farther out, just like a mortal getting careless in his enthusiasm. At last I surfaced for a little while, pulling in breath, oxygenating my tissues; then I dove, way deep down, and yanked off the float and let it rise up to the glassy bright roof of the world by itself. Turning, I swam away into the green darkness.

I headed north, past Malibu. By the time I was passing Point Mugu, I was pretty sure the old couple would have alerted the lifeguard that I'd failed to

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come back. The yellow float would have washed ashore, the only trace of me, because of course no body would ever be recovered.

There'd be a brief homicide investigation, but I'd made it pretty darned obvious it was a case of accidental death. My will was in a shoebox in my dresser, along with the other papers that had affirmed Joseph Denham's existence. Lewis would inherit my car and the small change in my bank account, along with the job of notifying the studio. A paragraph in *Variety,* a short service at Hollywood Memorial, and somebody else would take over my customary spot at the bar at Musso & Frank's Grill. The hole that Joseph Denham had left at MGM would disappear in a few days.

Neat, huh? It certainly beat the last time I died of old age, when I had to lie in my coffin for hours sweating under appliance makeup and listening to the funeral mass drone on and on and on!

And I had no regrets. I'd died in Hollywood before and I knew I'd eat lunch in that town again some day, when my former cronies there were all tucked away under white marble at Hollywood Memorial or being wheeled around the grounds of the Motion Picture Home. The Company always needs a few of its smooth operators in the movie industry, just as it needs us in the mortals' churches and governments: unobtrusive little guys like me to weight the dice of History now and then, or slip an extra ace into the deck. Nothing too obvious, you understand: somebody helpful standing at his Holiness' elbow to supply that *mot juste* when he's writing a papal encyclical, somebody to remind the senator where he left his pants, somebody to put a particular script where Mr. Hitchcock or Mr. Lucas will just happen to glance at it.

Yes, it's an important job, all right. Most of the time it makes up for having no life of my own.

Anyway I cruised on like an eel, ditching the snorkel tube and mask somewhere past Santa Barbara; I didn't really need them and they dragged in the water. The big heavy flippers I kicked off around Point Conception. Streamlined as a seal, I went my merry immortal way, coming to the surface once in a while to breathe. Night fell and day followed it, and I was still heading north.

There's a place above Cape San Martin called Jade Beach. You really can find jade there, if you're foolhardy enough to climb down the precarious wooden stairs from the clifftop to the sand far below. If the most recent winter storm hasn't washed out the stairs anyway, it's worth the uneasy descent. The place is all serpentine. The cliffs are green, the sand is green, the sea is green as emerald in that little cove. But there's hardly ever anybody there.

I've only been there myself because I knew a girl who loved the place, a long time ago before the stairs were built. That's another story.

The point is it's usually deserted, which was why I'd come up here in my Ford two months earlier, hauling a Company-issue cachebox with me. In it were all the things I'd need to get started with my new identity: paperwork, clothes, keys, money. I'd buried it at the base of the cliff, deep under the gritty cobbles. It had been a lot of work, but all I needed to do now was dig it up. As soon as I did I'd be Leslie Joseph, with papers to prove it, on his way to a hot meal in Monterey and an apartment and a job in San Francisco.

It was late afternoon when I turned right and made my way through the kelp forests into the cove. I was dead tired and cold; I figured a couple hours' snooze on the beach were in order before Leslie Joseph made his entrance.

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About a mile out I began my ascent to the surface, scanning to be certain there were no mortals around.

And, wouldn't you know it . . . there was one right on top of me.

Literally, I mean. There was a mortal female struggling in the water less than a fathom above my head. As I stared up at her, openmouthed, she began to sink.

Well, I had to do something. Our official designation is Preservers, isn't it? Maybe that was why, without even thinking, I shot upward like a cork and grabbed her, and a second later we broke the surface. All the same, it was a dumb thing to do.

We gulped in breath and she gave a feeble scream, staring at me with enormous black eyes. She struggled frantically for a few seconds and then hung limp, so I was able to get us ashore without wasting my breath on argument.

Dumb, dumb, dumb. She had to be a suicide; she was fully dressed and anyway I've seen them often enough to know the look mortals get in their eyes when they're determined to check out. She wouldn't thank me and I hadn't done myself any favors, either, by saving her life. What the hell was I going to do with her now?

I dragged her up on the sand and dropped her, and she lay there at my feet gasping, with her eyes shut tight.

"Please," she said. "I changed my mind at the end. I really did. I was trying to swim back. You must have seen that."

I peered down at her. Her hair trailed across her face like seaweed. She was young, maybe twenty, and from her clothes she wasn't rich, wasn't a farm girl either. Somebody's stenographer, maybe? I saw the purse and the battered shoes on the last step of the cliff stair. She'd walked a long way in shoes that were meant to sit side by side under a typing stand.

"You shouldn't have done it," I said, which was pretty obvious but what else was I going to say?

"I'm sorry!" she wept. "Oh, you can't take me to Hell! Haven't I been there already, the last two days?" She got up on her knees to clutch at me, and I saw myself reflected in her desperate eyes: black-clad thing with a white face, like Death in *The Seventh Seal,* and looking none too good after two days in the water either, eyes still sunk back in my head and protective lenses still raised. Okay; she thought I was something supernatural. Maybe I could work with that. I've had to impersonate gods in my time, working with mortals, and she seemed half-crazy with fear already.

"This is nothing to the fires of Hell," I said sternly.

But the girl was taking in the mundane details of my appearance: the buttons on my suit, the sagging wool, the stubble on my unshaven face. Her eyes were still frightened, but her lip curled in rage. She looked around. She spotted her worn-out shoes, saw the dead fish stranded a few feet away, saw the broken pop bottles under the stairs.

"But this is—everything's the same!" she shouted. "Everything's dirty and squalid and it isn't supposed to be this way still, not when you've died! Look at *you!* What kind of Angel of Death needs a shave?"

"For your information, I'm the Angel of Death by Drowning," I improvised, summoning all the dignity I could. "I work on a limited budget, okay? And you aren't exactly dead yet, which is why you still see the world with mortal eyes."

She said something nice young stenographers didn't often say in 1938,

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not where they could be heard anyway, and sagged backward and hid her face in her hands.

I had three options, here. I could let her swim out again and finish the job she'd started, which was what Company policy recommended in a situation like this: we're not supposed to interfere in their mortal lives. That way I could recover my cache without a witness.

I could kill her myself, which would also solve my witness problem but which is against official Company policy and still happens anyway sometimes, more often than they'll admit it's necessary. I hate killing mortals, though. I almost never do it. Besides, the girl reminded me of somebody I used to know. It made me uncomfortable.

I wasn't sure what my third option was. It probably involved some fast talking. So I cleared my throat and said:

"I wouldn't use that kind of language, if I were you. You might very well be going before the Eternal Throne in a minute or two, and you're in enough trouble already. What can have been so terrible you'd risk eternal damnation rather than live?"

The girl lowered her hands and blinked at me.

"Don't you already know?" she demanded, looking scornful.

"Do I look like they give me all the details Up There?" I countered, wringing out a fold of my saggy suit. Her look of scorn deepened. I decided to try a blind reading.

"I was told something about an office," I said, and from her face and her pulse and respiration I knew I was right. "There was some trouble there—?"

"You can say that again, brother!" the girl said, laughing bitterly. "Ten thousand dollars' worth of trouble."

"That's right," I said. I noticed the grief below the laughter. "And love."

Right again. The laughter died away and her face grew terribly quiet.

"That was my own fault," she said, in a voice a mortal couldn't have heard below the boom of the surf.

"And he deserted you," I guessed. She flinched. Right again. I usually enjoy batting a thousand, but today it made me feel lousy. Scanning her, I saw that at least she wasn't pregnant. I sat down on the sand beside her. Love, betrayal—and money. And an office. How did they all fit together? Theft? Embezzlement? I decided to try another angle.

"Why aren't you mad at him?"

She didn't answer right away, but from the way she avoided my gaze, staring out to sea, I could tell I was still on the track. At last she shrugged.

"It was my idea, wasn't it?" she said. "Maybe he'd have come up with the money some other way. He was in so much trouble and it wasn't his fault he didn't know how to live on a salary, you see. His people had always had money! Not like mine. He was raised with higher expectations. So then . . . once I'd told him about the Friday afternoon deposits, when I saw the way his face lit up . . . well, I knew we had to do it."

"You still love him," I said. I wasn't guessing on that one; I knew, and so would anybody else, mortal or immortal, who saw her face as she watched the green water rolling in.

"I think he must have gotten scared," she said. "I'm sure he didn't plan it. I guess he got to worrying, with me asleep there and unable to reassure him. I guess he thought it would be just me the police would be looking for. Maybe he was afraid of what his family would think, if we were caught and it got into the papers."

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Rich boy down on his luck meets poor girl who works at office, I thought to myself. He needs cash. She figures out a way to abscond with office's money. What happens next? They grab the loot, go on the run and then, while she's asleep in a room somewhere, the boyfriend ditches the girl. But not without—

"He took the money, and you still love him," I said.

She sighed. "I can't help that," she said.

"So when you woke up and found him gone, leaving you broke with the law after you, you came here." I said grimly. She looked at me.

"I didn't mean to," she said. "I walked out to the highway and I hitchhiked. I slept in the woods. I got a ride with a truck driver, but he kept asking me questions and I didn't know what to tell him. So the next time a farm came in sight I said that was where I lived and he let me out there. I just walked on. I came here and saw the stairs going down. That was when I decided. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Her voice was listless.

"It all seems so stupid. I didn't think I was stupid. I guess I deserve whatever happens now."

I didn't say anything for a minute. Some mortals deserve to die. The boyfriend deserved to die, wherever he was, but there wasn't anything I could do about him.

"What you did, you did for love," I told the girl. "But you were betrayed. Honey, that's one of the oldest tricks in the book, what he pulled on you! He used you to get the money and then dropped you like a rock. It's not your fault."

I wasn't making her feel better. I made an effort to control my temper. She shivered and looked out at the water again. The sun had gone down by this time and the temperature was dropping fast.

"Is my body still out there, on the bottom of the bay?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You're still in your body. You're only conditionally dead. That's why you're still feeling the cold and wet. We have to talk about this some more, but I'm going to make a fire first."

"The Angel of Death by Drowning builds campfires?" she said wearily.

"Yeah," I told her. I got up and looked around. Up the beach, left high and dry by last winter's tides, was a chunk of redwood log maybe three feet in diameter. I climbed up to it, lifted it as though it weighed nothing, and brought it back to where the girl sat. She stared up at me, wide-eyed, and any doubts she might have had about my supernatural nature were gone.

"Here we go," I said, and setting it down above the tideline I went into hyperfunction and busted the whole thing into a huge mound of punky splintered kindling.

"See, we've still got some things to work out," I said. "Think of this as a hearing to determine whether or not you're going to stand trial." I looked around for a sharp stick and did the twirling thing to make a fire, that almost never works at ordinary mortal speed but works in hyperfunction just fine. A little bright flame jetted up silently, slid along the splintered wood and began to eat into it.

She had watched all this in shock, staring. Yes! I had her attention now, all right, that was terror and awe in her black eyes, and it didn't matter any more that my union suit sagged or my chin was unshaven. I loomed against a background of dancing flame and held out my arms like Leopold Stokowski giving a command to the string section.

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"Do you truly repent your sin?" I asked her. She nodded mutely.

"Do you see the man who betrayed you for the cheap liar he is?" I demanded. "Not loving you, not worthy of your love?" Her face twisted and she drew a ragged breath and said,

"Yes."

"What would you do with your life, if it were given back to you?"

Was that hope leaping up in her eyes, or just the reflection of the fire? "I—I'd start over. Somehow! I'd never be such a fool again. I'd try and earn enough to send the money back to Mr. Jensen."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes!" she cried. "I don't know how I'd do it, but I swear that's what I'd do!"

"Then come to me, mortal child," I intoned, holding out my hand, "And I will give you your life back."

She rose and took my hand and I pulled her close, so she could get warm and dry by the fire, but her arms went around me and her mouth fastened desperately on mine.

Look, I didn't think that was going to happen. We're immortals but we're not all-knowing. I'd have thought it was the last thing that poor kid wanted. She did want it, though, she'd come there in the first place hoping something would ravage her; the least I could do was keep the experience sort of spiritual.

So I played Azrael, or some kind of angel anyway, there by the fire on that dark beach between life and death.

She slept like a baby, curled up in the firelight. Her face was so peaceful. I sat a few paces away with my head in my hands, feeling like thirty cents.

After a while of gloomy meditation on stuff that would only depress you if I described it, I got up and found her purse. Sitting down, I went through its contents.

There were some keys on a ring. A coin purse containing three pennies and a dime. A pencil. A dime-store fountain pen. A comb. A compact and a tube of lipstick. A bottle of nail polish and an emery board. A leather case containing a Social Security card issued to Cora Luciano. Two letters and a photograph.

I read the letters. They were from the guy. He was so smooth, so polished, he might have copied every word out of a romance novel. How could she have believed him for a minute? But she didn't understand professional deceivers. I do, being in that line of work myself.

I looked at the photograph too. It had been taken at an amusement park, I guess, not long ago. They were standing against a rail in front of a carousel. His arm was around her. He was tall, handsome, had a well-dressed Ivy League WASP kind of look to him. Bastard. Beside him she looked small and shabby and dark, poor little office clerk. Radiantly happy, of course.

Bastard.

Old, old story, nothing new to me. I still wanted to find the guy and kill him.

I knew, in the back of my mind, why this was making me so sore. It had to do with this green place and another girl who'd come here once, whose life had been wrecked by a smooth-talking mortal man.

That girl hadn't died here. She can't die, much as she'd like to.

I couldn't help her. I never can.

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* * *

After a while I got up and looked at Cora, studying her critically. I took the letters, the photograph and the Social Security card and fed them to the fire.

I walked away down the beach to where I'd buried my cachebox and dug it up. Retrieving some of the stuff inside, I went back to the fire and sat down to work.

The Company had a neat little document alteration device back then, issued to most field personnel. It looked like a fountain pen. Actually when you unscrewed the cap the business end *was* a fountain pen, and if you were a cyborg or even just a really good forger, you could imitate typed letters with it that nobody could tell hadn't been formed on a machine. When you reversed the device, though, when you took off the smaller cap on the other end, there was an ittybitty laser that was delicate enough to remove the ink on paper fibers without removing the fibers underneath.

I did the birth certificate first. All I had to change on that was the gender and year of birth; **1913** became **1918.** I deleted my signature on the Social Security card. She'd have to sign it herself, when she became Miss Leslie Joseph. I thanked God we were still in the paper age; doing something like this in, say, 1998 would be a nightmare.

I'd have to make myself up a new birth certificate and Social Security card, of course, and I'd have to change the name on my new driver's license—I thought of calling myself Angelo Morte, but the Company frowns on obvious stuff like that. They prefer names that don't draw attention. I settled on William Joseph. Boring, but with luck I'd only have to use it for a few decades. Bill Joseph. Yeah. I could be a Bill Joseph.

I had everything stashed away again by the time I woke her. The sky was just beginning to get light.

"Cora."

"Hm?" She opened her eyes and then sat up abruptly, staring at me. "Oh, my God. I thought you—"

"You thought I was a dream? Almost. Listen to me, Cora, I'm going back now and I don't have a lot of time." I hunkered down beside her. "You've been given a new life. Cora Luciano died out there in the water, and so did all her mistakes. You're Leslie Joseph now, understand?"

"Leslie Joseph," she repeated, and she didn't understand but she was trying to.

"That's right," I said, and held up her birth certificate. "See? Here's your proof. You're twenty years old and you'll be twenty-one next March. Here's your Social Security card. Sign your name, Leslie." I held it out to her with the pen from her purse. Wonderingly, she signed *Leslie Joseph.*

"Great," I said, and taking the card I slipped it into the leather case that had held her old one. Next I held up a thick wad of cash. "Thousand dollars, mostly in tens and twenties. You know better than to flash it, though, right, Leslie? You're a smart girl. Stick it down in the bottom of your purse, peel off a ten and keep it at the top." I put the money in her hands.

"You're going to put on your shoes and go up the stairs over there and walk north along the highway. Hitchhike, if you can find another woman to give you a ride. When you get to Monterey, buy yourself all new clothes. New shoes. New handbag. New makeup, too, in different shades. Ditch all of Cora's things. Buy a bus ticket to San Francisco and once you get there, buy a train ticket to New York. Get on that train and never look back."

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I got to my feet and backed away from her, into the waves.

"You'll be fine in New York, Leslie. It's a big place, lots of opportunities, and nobody knows anybody back there. You'll find an apartment. You'll find an office job. Maybe you'll even find a nice guy. But nobody, and I mean nobody, is ever again going to talk you into doing something you know is bad for you. Okay? You got all that, Leslie?"

She nodded as if mesmerized, watching me as I retreated. The water was up to my chest now, the swell was breaking over my shoulders.

"You're one lucky mortal, Leslie," I called to her. "You just got handed the break of your life. It's up to you what happens now."

I sank into the dark water and swam away under the surface. I didn't come up again until I was far enough out that she couldn't see me.

I could see her, though. She had put on her shoes and was climbing the stairs in a determined kind of way. I watched as she got up to the road, took a firm grip on her purse and marched away into the morning.

She didn't look back.

The cachebox was already breaking up—they're not meant to be re-used after the seal is broken—so my Bill Joseph clothes were full of sand, but at least they were dry, and I was able to warm myself up some over the smoking embers of the fire. I stuffed my new wallet in my pocket, slung on my knapsack, climbed the stairs and walked south as far as Gorda, where I ate enough breakfast for three guys.

Then I talked a mortal into giving me a ride as far as San Luis Obispo. He was a nice mortal. I told him all about Bill Joseph, how I was a twenty-five-year-old guy from Santa Rosa, how I lived on 19th Avenue in San Francisco, how I was hiking down here on vacation from my job, which was in a car dealership at Market and Van Ness, how I thought Hitler was a creep and there was probably going to be a war soon and how my favorite song was *Harbor Lights,* how my mother was dead and my father'd raised me . . . on and on, and I got the mortal to believe it all. By the time I got on the train at San Luis, I almost believed it myself.

Bill Joseph enlisted when the war broke out, got himself a nice post as a general's aide, and was right there when the Supreme Allied Command broke into places like Berchtesgaden and Merkers, where the Nazis had stored all kinds of treasure they'd looted from museums and private collections. Bill Joseph knew what happened to a lot of stuff that was never accounted for. He died under mysterious circumstances, though, before anybody could ask him about it. Drowned in the Danube, poor guy. No body was ever found.

Leslie Joseph didn't drown. She went to New York just like I told her to, like the good kid she really was. I found her after the war, though I didn't let her spot me following her around. We're not supposed to do stuff like that, but, well, we do, and anyway I was so happy when I saw she'd gotten over that bastard who'd screwed her up.

She met an ordinary guy. He ran a store. She married him. They ran the store together then and had three kids. They were as blissful as mortals who have three kids can be. They were celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary around the time I went to work for Mr. Spielberg at Universal. Great happy ending, huh?

I wish to God it was that easy for us. ○

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JANUARY FIRES

27 January 1967

precisely one month before I'd leave for Vietnam

the TV went silent

we all looked into the white noise

news bulletin
the Apollo One astronauts
Grissom Chaffee White
have died in a freak fire

(killed by pure oxygen and one spark
on a wire's cheap cotton insulation)

no pictures please no pictures

years later tempered by combat I saw those grim
unheroic pictures ugly and real as napalm death

one almost got the door open

28 January 1986

Daytona Beach
tropic morning winter cold
rigid splash of icy breakers

freezing seabirds
stalk annoyed
on cold sand

three launch holds no more patience
coffee cold and bitter gritty
waiting and grit and cold
that's all we talked about
talking to keep warm

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it finally went up

six jocks and one schoolteacher

riding a white column of steam

to a solid spasm of fire

cloud tombstone on the edge of space

the tourists cheering madly madly
thinking it was part of the show
booster separation or the rest
whatever they call it of us
in shock

watching pieces fall
into the frigid water

no parachutes no parachutes

two hours later numb
the resident expert I sat down in front of a microphone
and the pale talkshow woman
asked whether I would still go up

sure I said twenty-five to one odds
did you ever draw to an inside straight
and did you expect to make it

while something inside

still stalking jungle trail

said liar liar liar

you know

you would kill anything

to stay alive you

would even kill a dream

—Joe Haldeman

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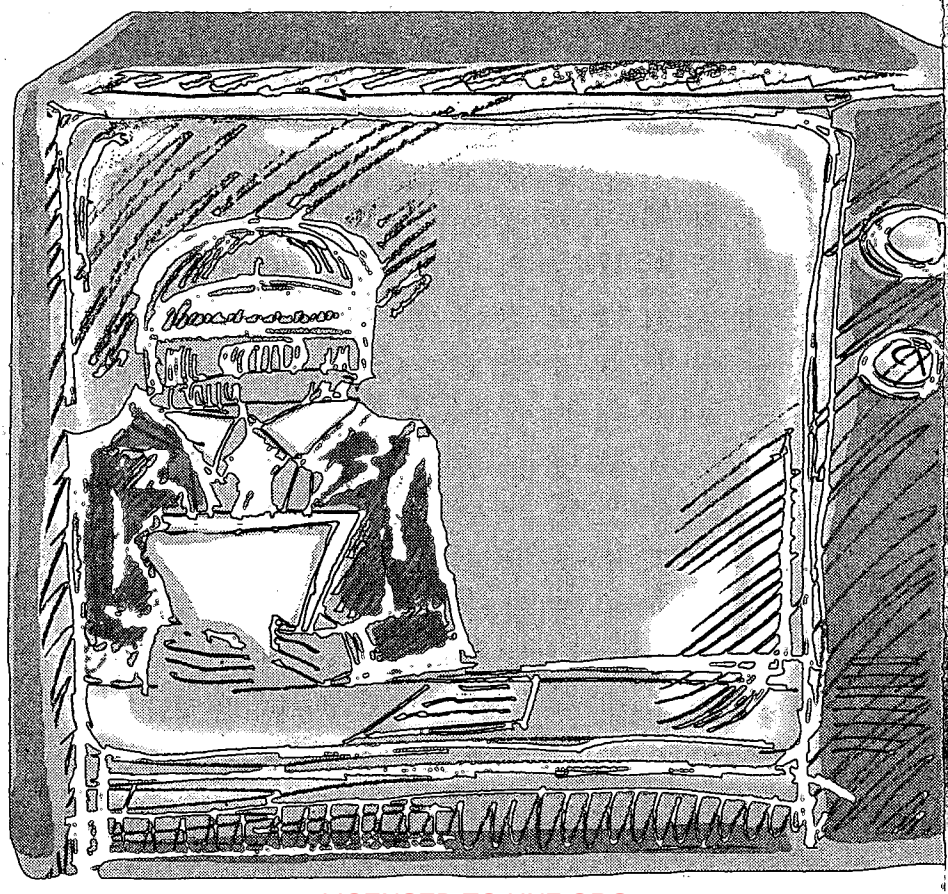
An unusual cast of actors, along with the entire population of Earth, begins the process of . . .

GETTING READY FOR PRIME TIME

Lawrence Person

Illustration by June Levine



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All in all, I would have to say it was 1 percent curiosity, 9 percent sheer stubbornness, and 90 percent dumb luck.

It was a slow Sunday, and I was stuck doing Broad Spectrum Frequency Exclusion Calibration, which is a royal pain in the ass. The entire idea behind building the Very Large Broad Spectrum Radio Array was that the whole shebang could listen in on the entire electromagnetic spectrum, and possibly step through selected chunks fairly quickly. In theory, this would allow you to find things you wouldn't normally be looking for. For example, you could find out which parts of the radio spectrum are "hot" days or weeks after a gamma burst goes off in that part of the sky.

The problem was, VLBSRA also included the commercial and military bands, which had previously been nearly impossible to use for radio astronomy. The idea behind the VLBSRA was that we had a sufficiently large array, and enough computing power at our disposal, to A) Isolate the commercial broadcasts, B) Tune one of the array dishes to that particular source, and C) digitally "knock out" the noise coming from that source. So, doing a BSFEC meant finding a terrestrial broadcast source, pinpointing it, characterizing the signal, and fine tuning that station so you could set a dish on it to knock that particular signal out when you ran the exclusion subroutines during data gathering. Once you had done that, you went on to the next source, etc., etc. In theory, once you got through, you should have the ability to "zero out" every terrestrial radio source on the planet, at least for the bands that propagated that far.

That night I was slogging through the "junk bands," 54-88, and 174-220 MHz: the old analog VHF TV bands. Even though all the big players in the U.S. had been digital for decades, the old analog stations were kept running by the consent decree that had allowed all the big boys to jump on the digital bandwagon. Plus a lot of the international TV stations were still analog, and VLBSRA was sensitive enough to pick up some of the lower bands from around the world, especially when we were getting Sporadic-E, tropo, or F-layer DXing. All of which meant I had a long night ahead of me.

By eleven PM MDT, I had already tuned in and knocked out everything on channels 2-12, and was down to the last analog Channel 13 station in range, the faint ghost of a station out of Sacramento. When the system flashed green, I thought I would finally see a reasonably smooth readout. However, I was annoyed to see one faint but unmistakable signal that was just a bit too coherent to be background noise. I suspected it was a low-level pirate off the California coast (pretty rare to pick up this far into Nevada, but not unheard of), in which case pinpointing exclusion data would be useless for future reference, but I'd be damned if I'll let someone keep me from finishing the zero out procedure. So I rolled up my sleeves and ran the pinpointing program.

A few seconds later the computer flashed "Not a Terrestrial Signal" and autolaunched the radio astronomy pinpointing program. A few minutes later, it had the answer, but one so bizarre I ran the program two more times (with the same results) before I started to believe it.

It was your standard analog TV signal, except that it was heavily blue-shifted, as though the transmission source was traveling toward Earth at about 35 percent the speed of light.

Even more surprising was where it came from. Parallax telemetry indicated it was being transmitted from a point less than two light years away in the direction of Polaris.

I ran the results three more times as the implications sank in. Even before I had it decoded, I had already discovered the big message all those

SETI researchers had been looking for all their lives: *we're here.* What's more, I had also verified the message Hollywood and the saucer nuts had been pushing for decades: *we're coming*.

But the *real* message I couldn't decode until after midnight. Even though it could receive them, the VLBSRA wasn't designed for decoding TV signals, especially not old analog signals. It took me nearly an hour to find, download, and install the appropriate codec. After a few minutes of Doppler compensation tweaking I was able to view the message the aliens were sending us.

It was *Gilligan's Island*.

I even recognized the episode, which I had seen at my grandparents'-house just after the turn of the century. It was the one where the British butterfly hunter landed on the island to collect specimens, and all the castaways were trying to get him drunk so they could steal his flare gun and have his ship pick them up. The same sets, the same costumes, the same plot. In fact, *all* the details were the same, save one.

In this version, all the actors were aliens.

Of course, it wasn't all *Gilligan's Island*. They also broadcast *I Love Lucy, The Dick Van Dyke Show, Hogan's Heroes,* and *The Brady Bunch*. Classic All-American 20C sitcom fare, but each starring an All-Alien cast. (It was only later that they started doing dramas like *The Fugitive, Perry Mason,* and (ironically) *Star Trek,* and recently we've started receiving movies. The first one they broadcast was *Gone With the Wind*.)

They even had a commercial.

Not commercials, *commercial,* the same one at every break and between shows. Moreover, it didn't appear to pitch peanut butter or laundry detergent. An alien in a plain white robe against a blue backdrop simply said something that took a little over ten seconds, then back to our regularly scheduled program.

The aliens themselves had a sort of metallic-green cast to their skin, if you could call it skin. It actually looked more like a chitinous shell, except far more flexible. They possessed a tall body trunk (around eight or nine feet high, if the hut entrances they ducked to enter were any indication) with two thickish arms, somewhat below shoulder height, that ended in a cluster of prehensile gripping appendages. The trunk widened out before reaching the ground, with baseball-sized knobby protrusions visible near the bottom of "Mary Ann" and "Ginger's" trunks (those of their "male" counterparts were discreetly hidden behind a close approximation of pants). Their bodies finally terminated in four protrusion that seemed too stubby to be legs, and if you looked close enough they seemed to undulate slightly when they moved. They had no eyes as such, only a black arc at the top of their heads, if you could call them heads; they looked more like the head of a shark or a beetle, with nothing resembling a neck. There was a round opening in the middle of their "faces," with a dozen circular buds arranged around it.

Their speech consisted of deep, mellifluous, bell-like modulated tones in which individual words were difficult to pick out. At first I didn't realize it was speech, because sometimes those sounds occurred without anyone seeming to speak. Later on, one of my colleagues figured out that was the laugh track.

By 4:30 AM, most of my fellow researchers had shown up, bleary eyed after early morning calls, to confirm my description of what VLBSRA had picked up. We went over the data with a fine-toothed comb, making sure the messages weren't a sophisticated spoof by some joker with a satellite down-

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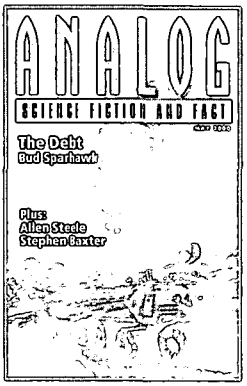

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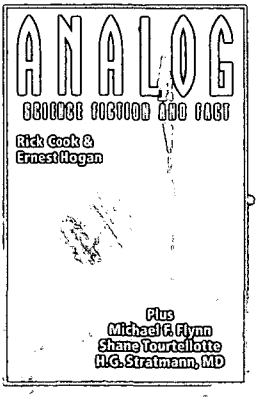

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link. I watched as my colleagues' quietly sarcastic smiles at my unlikely find mutated into looks of sheerest envy. I was the one who had made The Find of the Century. Rightfully or not, the name of Leroy Smith was going to be written down next to those of Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson in the big pop-up book of *Radio Astronomy's Luckiest Bastards*.

And you know the rest. The big press announcement, the riots, the stock market crash and rebound, the fatwa, the fifth Indo-Pakistani war, the second partition of Afghanistan, the bombings, the TLF, the suicides, the Church of the Stellar Rapture, the apocalypse cults, the fan clubs, and Itomi's assassination. And, not so coincidentally, the political speeches, the books, the movies, the TV shows, the fuzzies, the jokes, the T-shirts, the masks, the salt and pepper shakers, and the Talking Alien Toilet™.

And for me, personally, the interviews, the money, the groupies, the house in Hollywood, the Beautiful Hollywood Wife, meeting the President, speaking at the UN, the Messy, Expensive Divorce, and the endless rounds of talk shows. (And yes, I was happy with the way that Richard James played me in *Stellar Message,* even though I think Lional Ashka bears a stronger resemblance.) These days I'm a tenured professor at UCLA, teaching two radio astronomy courses where my grad students do all the real work. The university also pays for the bodyguards and metal detectors.

Officially I'm still on staff at VLBSRA, and they love to trot me out for congressional visitors around budget time. About a third of the papers on the aliens have my name as a contributor. (One or two I even helped write.) And every now and then they let me at the controls so I can pretend to do real science. But I've lost my edge. Every year I seem to fall further and further behind my ever-burgeoning stacks of technical journals.

And, of course, the message. It took us less than a day to figure out that the aliens had handed us the equivalent of a Rosetta Stone, and we still kicked ourselves for not realizing it sooner. We had the linguistics lab up and running in less than a week, and after three days of running the original TV shows and the alien version side by side, we had a vocabulary of nearly 5,000 words. When we decoded that "commercial" at the end of the first day, it was a single, simple sentence:

"We're coming to share our dreams!"

And so far, that's been the only message. More reruns of our shows with alien actors, but nothing of theirs. According to our estimates, we should be receiving their reply to our first messages in a matter of weeks. Like everyone else in the world, I'm very interested in what they'll have to say. Also like everyone else, I have no idea what it will be.

Certainly they know us well, perhaps better than we can ever know them. They already know *our* dreams, and our nightmares. They've already seen *My Fair Lady, Casablanca, Star Wars, Citizen Kane, The Godfather, Schindler's List, The Exorcist, Fiddler on the Roof, The Killing Fields, Some Like It Hot, The Pablo Escobar Story, Roots, Taxi Driver, The Sound of Music, The Searchers, Duck Soup, Holocaust, It's a Wonderful Life, Harvest of Sorrow, Pulp Fiction,* and *Singing in the Rain*—not to mention *War of the Worlds, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Forbidden Planet, E.T., Independence Day, The Sparrow,* and *Alien*. They know our hopes, our worries, our loves, our lies, our virtues, our vices, our religions, our wars, our genocides. They know all this, and still they're coming to share their own dreams. They're either saints, or completely and utterly insane. Or maybe, like us, they're somewhere in between.

I'm not sure which of those possibilities I find the most frightening. ○

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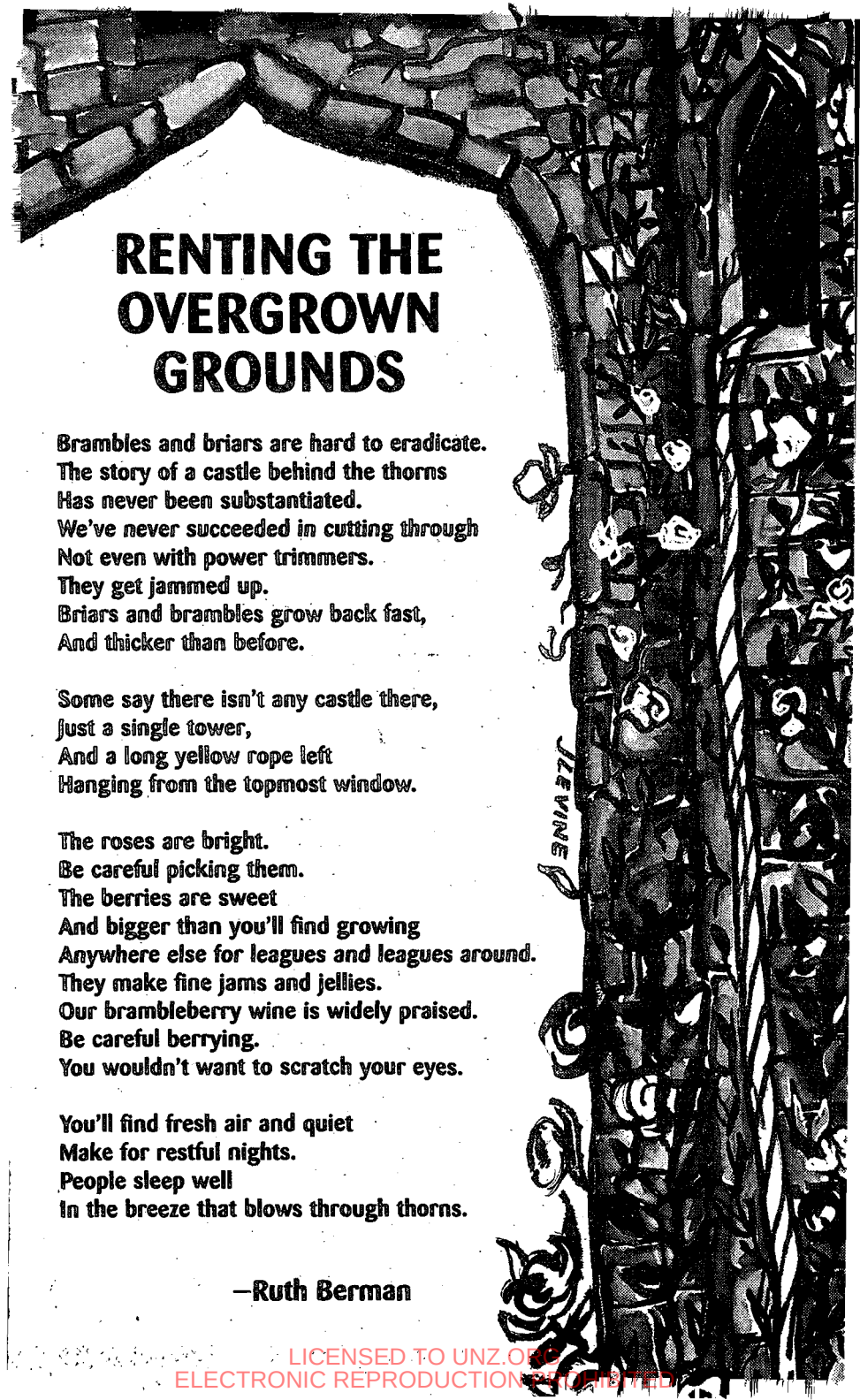

RENTING THE OVERGROWN GROUNDS

Brambles and briars are hard to eradicate.
The story of a castle behind the thorns
Has never been substantiated.
We've never succeeded in cutting through
Not even with power trimmers.
They get jammed up.
Briars and brambles grow back fast,
And thicker than before.

Some say there isn't any castle there,
Just a single tower,
And a long yellow rope left
Hanging from the topmost window.

The roses are bright.
Be careful picking them.
The berries are sweet
And bigger than you'll find growing
Anywhere else for leagues and leagues around.
They make fine jams and jellies.
Our brambleberry wine is widely praised.
Be careful berrying.
You wouldn't want to scratch your eyes.

You'll find fresh air and quiet
Make for restful nights.
People sleep well
In the breeze that blows through thorns.

—Ruth Berman

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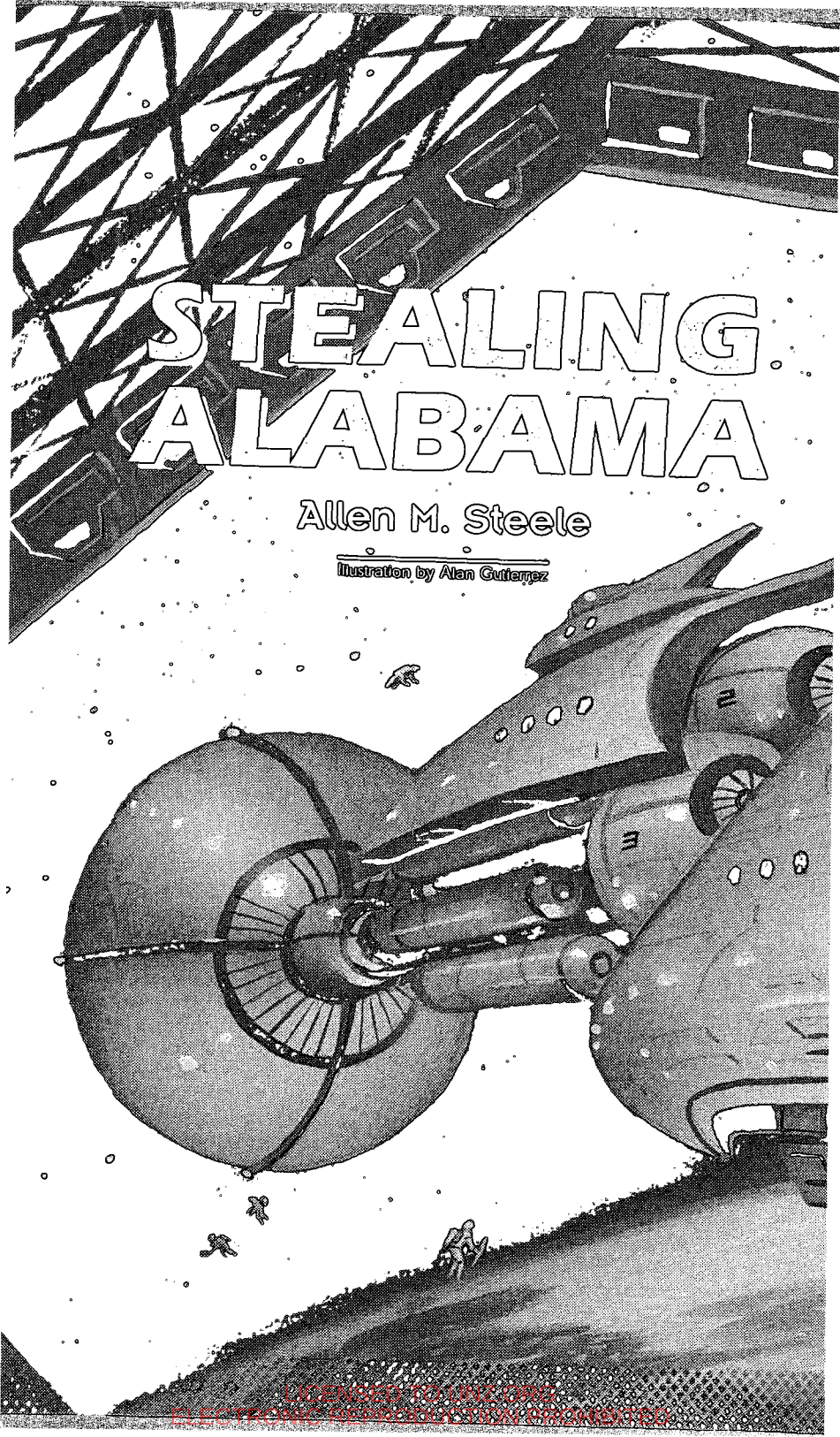

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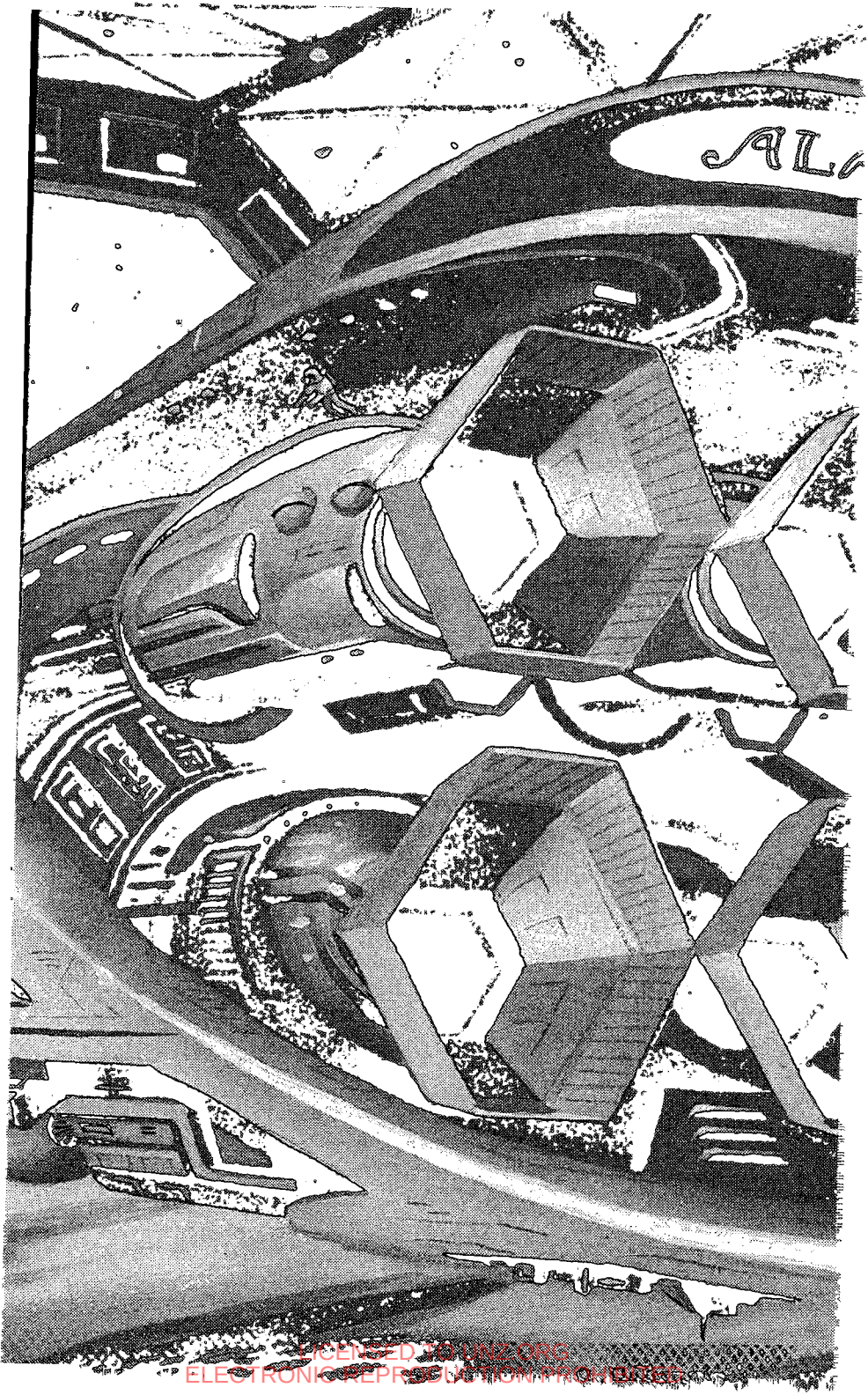

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Allen M. Steele's most recent novel, *Oceanspace*, was published last year by Ace. Ace will release his next book, *Chronospace*, in May. That novel will be an expansion of his Hugo-award winning novella ". . . Where Angels Fear to Tread," which first appeared in the October/November 1997 issue of *Asimov's*. Mr. Steele's thrilling new tale about "Stealing Alabama" is the first in a series of stories. We will follow it up shortly with "The Days Between."

Philadelphia 7.4.70 / T-28.25.03

The Liberty Bell is much larger than he expected. Nearly fifteen feet tall, weighing over two thousand pounds, it's suspended by its oak arm between two cement supports, the ceiling lights casting a dull sheen from its bronze surface. Captain Lee stands in front of the bell, meditating upon the long crack that runs down its side, the Biblical inscription carved around its top: *Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land unto All the Inhabitants Thereof. Lev. XXV:X.*

Reflected in the window behind the bell he can see the URS lieutenant who escorted him to the pavilion. The park ranger who met them there is young and nervous; his hand was sweaty when Lee clasped it, and he stuttered as he commenced a long-winded recital of the bell's history until Lee politely asked to be left alone. Now they wait patiently behind him, respectfully giving him a few moments alone.

Through the pavilion window, on the opposite side of the grassy mall, lies Independence Hall. The reception is already underway, yet Lee's in no hurry to join it, even though the party is being held in honor of him and his crew. It's a distinct privilege to be allowed to view the Liberty Bell; one of the first acts the government took after the Revolution was to close this site to the public. Citing the risk of a terrorist attack, the Internal Security Agency claimed that the bell was too valuable to be left unguarded during a national emergency, yet it's been nearly twelve years since the Revolution and still the Liberty Bell is off-limits to everyone save the party elite. Lee can't help but wonder if the government fears what the average citizen might think if he saw for himself the artifact from which the Liberty Party took its name, and read the words inscribed upon it.

There's still time to call it off. A few words whispered to the right people, a couple of discreet phone calls using innocuous code phrases, and the conspiracy would not so much unravel as it would simply cease to exist. Everyone involved would stop what they're doing and assume fall-back positions, and with any luck the prefects would never know that a plot had transpired.

Tonight's his last chance to back out. After this, there's no turning back, no acceptable alternative except success; failure means treason and treason

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means death. Which is why he's come here, to this particular place; not as a symbolic display of patriotism, as everyone assumes, but simply to give himself a few minutes to think.

So is he going through with this or not?

Lee still hasn't answered his own question as he turns away from the bell. The lieutenant snaps to attention; the ranger self-consciously does the same even though it isn't necessary.

"All right, Lieutenant," he says quietly, "I'm done here. Let's go to the party."

As appropriate for the Fourth of July, the President's Reception is being held in the cobblestone square behind Independence Hall. Once the guests make their way through the security checkpoints, they find that an enormous screen has been unfurled across the rear of the red-brick colonial courthouse, upon which real-time images of the *Alabama* are being projected. Lee ignores the screen as he saunters through the crowd, untasted glass of champagne in his gloved left hand, his right hand held formally behind his back. In the humid warmth of the July evening, his white dress uniform clings to his skin. He deliberately arrived after his senior officers; attending this fete was the thing he was most reluctant to do, yet his appearance is mandatory. Besides, there's one last bit of important business that needs to be settled.

So Captain Lee mingles with the gentlemen in their batswing ties and frock coats and the ladies in their bodices and gowns, smiling and bowing, pausing now and then to shake some stranger's hand or be photographed with another, yet taking care to remain in motion so as not to be cornered for very long. Along the edge of the crowd, he can see the uniforms of URS soldiers: black berets, jodhpurs ducked into leather knee boots, polished rifles held at parade rest. The red softball-size spheres of surveillance floaters hover above the partygoers, watching, listening, scanning. Security is tight; the president is supposed to be flying up from Atlanta for the occasion, although Lee has little doubt that he will be unavoidably detained. Philadelphia is a little too close to the New England border for the president of the United Republic of America to consider himself entirely safe. Indeed, very few people ever see him outside the capital, although the news media regularly show footage of him attending events in places as far distant as Southern California.

Spotting another pair of white service uniforms beneath the boughs of a walnut tree, Lee makes his way through the crowd, and finds Tom Shapiro, the *Alabama*'s First Officer, huddled with his Executive Officer, Jud Tinsley. He can't make out what they're saying until he's nearly beside them. Tinsley sees him coming, and briefly touches Shapiro's elbow as he straightens his shoulders.

"Evening, Captain," Shapiro says.

"Gentlemen . . ."

"Enjoying the party, sir?" Tinsley raises his bare hand to stifle a burp. "Pretty nice send-off they're giving us."

"It'll do." Lee knows the XO is drunk even before he notices the empty champagne glass on the low wall below the tree. "Just make sure you don't enjoy yourselves too much. Jud, button your tunic and put on your gloves. We're in public."

"Sorry, sir." Tinsley's face reddens; he digs into his trouser pockets for his gloves. "It's kinda warm tonight."

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"Enjoy it. You'll be cold soon enough." Lee steps forward to fasten the top brass button of the younger man's uniform. Shapiro, at least, is properly dressed and reasonably sober. "You're not talking about anything you shouldn't, are you?" he murmurs when he's close enough that only the two of them can hear him.

Tinsley starts to mutter a half-hearted denial. "Just a couple of details," Shapiro says quietly. He glances up at the low tree limbs above them. "We figured the floaters couldn't sneak up on us over here."

Good thinking, but not good enough. "Not the time nor place," Lee says. "Save it for . . ."

He catches himself. The next meeting, he was about to say, yet there aren't going to be any more meetings, are there? After the reception they'll be driven straight to the airport, where they're scheduled to board a jet to Gingrich Space Center. By 0600 tomorrow morning they'll be in quarantine along with the rest of the crew, and there will be no opportunity for any of them to have a conversation without risk of being monitored. If they wait until they reach the *Alabama*, it may be too late to make any changes. Perhaps Tom has the right idea after all.

"Has something come up?" Lee casually gazes up at the walnut tree, just to make certain a floater isn't hiding among the leaves. "Anything I should know about?"

Neither of his senior officers say anything, although they give each other a reticent look. "Nothing we haven't already gone over, sir," Shapiro says at last. "It's just . . . I mean, the ignition lock-out . . ."

"Don't worry," Lee says. "We're taking care of . . ." Tinsley coughs into his fist, his right foot innocuously prodding Lee's shoe. The captain glances his way, sees the XO gazing past his shoulder. A swish of a crinoline skirt from close behind, then a soft hand touches his arm.

"If I didn't know better, Robert," Elise says, "I'd swear you were avoiding me."

She's half-right; if Lee had known she would be here, he would have avoided her. Yet as soon as he hears her voice, he realizes this particular encounter is inevitable: it's only natural that she would attend this reception, and not only because they were once married.

Yet, as the captain turns toward Elise Rochelle Lee, he feels no regret over having left her. Their marriage lasted for more than seventeen years, and yet she remains as icily beautiful as when they first met at an Academy mixer; it's only in the last eighteen months that he's come to realize that he barely knows her. The fact that she's kept his name long after their legal separation is yet another indication that she married him for reasons that had more to do with social stature than love; for all intents and purposes, she's still the wife of Captain R.E. Lee, commanding officer of the URSS *Alabama*.

"I wasn't. I simply didn't see you among all these people." Lee takes her silk-gloved hand, gives her a quick buss on the cheek. "You look splendid . . . is that a new dress?"

"Flatterer." Elise folds her hand around his elbow as her gaze shifts to Shapiro and Tinsley. "Pardon me, gentlemen, but may I borrow your captain? There's someone who wants to meet him."

"By all means." Shapiro essays a formal bow as he steps back. Tinsley does the same, and Lee can't help but notice that his eyes never leave Elise's cleavage. Those breasts once attracted him, too; it took him a long time to discover that the heart beneath them was cold. "Captain, Madame . . ."

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"Your father?" Lee murmurs as Elise escorts him away. "I figured he would send you to find me."

"Perhaps." Her smile becomes enigmatic as they stroll through the crowd. "Why, is it such a burden for you to see him one last time? After all, he had quite a bit to do with your selection."

A soft purr from somewhere just above his head. A floater has picked them up; now it's following them as they move through the reception. Even if he was inclined to give a candid answer—*thank you, but I've accomplished this on my own*—now isn't the time. "For which I'm grateful," Lee says. "And no, it isn't a burden."

"Good. I rather hoped not." Her hand slides down to take his own. "Besides, he has a treat for you."

They find Joseph R. Rochelle, the Senator from Virginia, standing in front of the screen, surrounded as always by aides, Liberty Party apparatchiks, local political cronies, and sycophants of one sort or another. A short, avuncular man for whom somatotropin therapy has erased nearly twenty years from his real age, he now looks only slightly older than his former son-in-law. His back is turned as they approach; he must have just finished another one of his anecdotes, for everyone laughs out loud. Senator Rochelle rarely lacks for an audience, in or out of Atlanta.

"Oh, very good! You've found him!" Senator Rochelle beams as his daughter leads Captain Lee into the midst of the circle, then he half-turns to make an expansive gesture at the screen looming above them. "I was just saying that someone . . . I won't say whom, of course . . . in Atlanta had insisted upon christening your ship the *Virginia*." A broad wink that everyone understands. "But of course, that particular someone didn't have quite as much clout as the gentleman from another state."

More laughter from the senator's entourage, and Lee forces himself to smile appreciatively. While the *Alabama* was still under construction, there had been considerable in-fighting within Congress over which state the vessel would be named after. In the end, the president settled the dispute by christening it in honor of the state whose NASA center had been most responsible for its research and development. An ironic choice, since NASA itself no longer exists; it's now yet another civilian agency dismantled under the National Reform Program, its primary functions folded into the Federal Space Agency, an arm of the United Republic Service.

But Lee doesn't say anything, nor does he need to; it's only necessary for him to smile and bow as the senator introduces him to a dozen or so men and women whose names he forgets as soon as he shakes their hands, while Elise stands between them, playing the role of the loyal daughter and loving wife. When all was said and done, this was about appearances; once again, Lee realizes that he hadn't chosen his wife so much as she had chosen him, and then only with her father's pragmatic approval. The senator needed a son-in-law from the Academy of the Republic, an up-and-coming URS officer whose career he could advance from a discreet distance in order to further his own political ambitions. Tonight's the big payoff for everyone.

As the senator begins telling another one of his stories, Lee's attention drifts to the screen towering above them. The *Alabama* hangs suspended in low orbit above Earth, the spotlights of its skeletal dry-dock reflecting dully off the ship's light-grey fuselage. A tug gently maneuvers a cylindrical barge into position below the ship's spherical main fuel tank, in preparation for onloading another ten thousand tons of deuterium and helium-3 strip-

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mined from the mountains of the Moon. Fueling operations will continue non-stop right up until ten hours before the beginning of *Alabama*'s scheduled launch at 2400 tomorrow night.

Once again, Lee finds himself wondering if he should call it off. Everything depends upon the timetable being kept. Nothing can be allowed to go wrong between now and then . . . and yet there are a hundred different ways it could all fall apart.

"Why the long face, Captain?" One of the nameless men to whom he has just been introduced nudges his left shoulder. "Concerned about the mission?"

"No, not at all." Out of the corner of his eye, Lee catches Elise studying him. "Just observing the fuel-up, that's all."

"Robert doesn't worry. He's the coolest officer the Academy has ever produced." Senator Rochelle favors his son-in-law with a something that might resemble fondness unless one happened to look closely at his eyes. "He just wants to get out of here and see to his ship. Isn't that right, Bob?"

"Anything you say, Duke." Lee addresses the senator by his nickname, and this elicits more laughter from the cronies. No one ever says no to the Senator from Virginia; by much the same token, Duke knows that Lee doesn't like to be called Bob. Tit for tat.

Rochelle chuckles as he pats Lee on the shoulder, then he takes him by the arm. "If you'll excuse us," he says to the others, "I'd like to have a few words with the Captain." They nod and murmur as Rochelle leads Lee away, Elise falling in behind them. "This will take just a moment," Rochelle says softly once they're out of earshot. "There's someone here who wants to meet you."

Believing the senator wants to introduce him to yet another politician, Lee suppresses a sigh as he lets Rochelle walk him past the edge of the crowd. Yet Duke surprises him; instead, he takes him behind the screen, toward the back entrance of Independence Hall. A pair of soldiers stands guard near the door, their rifles at ready; behind them is a prefect, wearing the calf-length dark grey overcoat and braided cap that is the uniform of ISA officers. The soldiers step aside when they see the senator, but the prefect doesn't budge. He silently waits as Rochelle produces his I.D. folder; Elise reluctantly does the same, giving the intelligence officer a haughty glare as she holds her card out to him to inspect. Only Lee is spared; apparently the prefect recognizes him, for he shakes his head as Lee reaches into his pocket. Satisfied, the officer turns and opens the narrow wooden door leading into the building.

The hallway is silent, vacant save for another soldier inside the entrance. Their footsteps echo faintly off the old plaster walls as Rochelle beckons Lee and his daughter toward a double door to the right; he gives them a quick look-over as if to check their appearance, then he quietly taps on the door. A moment passes; the door clicks as it's unlocked from within, then it's opened by yet another soldier standing just inside.

Lee immediately recognizes this place from history texts he's studied since childhood: the Assembly Room, where the Declaration of Independence was signed and the First Constitution debated and framed. Small wooden desks, each with its inkpot and quill pen, arranged in semi-circular rows around a low platform on which a long table has been placed in front of three high-backed chairs. And here, in the middle of the oak-paneled room with his back turned toward them, stands Hamilton Conroy, the President of the United Republic of America.

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Senator Rochelle stops at the wooden railing at the back of the room. "Mr. President," he says formally, "may I present to you Captain Robert E. Lee, commander of the United Republic Service Spaceship *Alabama*."

Hearing the senator, President Conroy turns away from the gaunt middle-aged man with whom he had been conversing. Rotund and short of stature, with narrow brown eyes set in a broad face, the president is smaller than he seems on government netv; now he seems diminished by the room itself. A pretender to history, Lee reflects. A charlatan aspiring to greatness.

"Indeed." The president smiles briefly as he walks toward the railing, his hands clasped together behind his frock coat. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, Captain. Your father-in-law has told me great things about you."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Lee doesn't relax from the rigid stance he automatically assumed the moment he saw the Commander-in-Chief. "I hope I live up to your expectations."

The president laughs dryly, without much humor. "At ease, Captain. You're among friends here." He glances at Senator Rochelle. "Duke, you should have let him know I would be here. This reception is in his honor, after all. No need for surprises."

"The ISA requested I keep your presence secret," Rochelle says. "Security considerations."

"Yes, of course." The president dismisses the senator with scarcely a nod, his attention solely focused upon Lee. "Sorry to take you away from the party, Captain. I only wished to meet you in person. I haven't had a chance to do so before, and after tonight I'll never have an opportunity to do so again."

"Yes sir, Mr. President." Lee clasps his hands behind him. From the corner of his eye he sees Elise doing a slow burn. She's probably been awaiting this moment for several weeks; now she's being ignored, with no one bothering to introduce her to the president. "I apologize if I've taken you away from urgent business."

The smile fades from the president's face. "Only matters of state." He turns toward the man with whom he had been speaking. "I don't know if you've ever met our Director of Internal Security before . . . Mr. Shaw, Captain Lee."

"Never before now, Mr. President." Roland Shaw glides down the aisle to extend his hand. "However, I believe we have a meeting at the Cape tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir, we do." Lee clasps Shaw's hand. "A last-minute detail before the shuttle launch. Security procedures . . ."

"Of course." The left corner of Shaw's mouth tics upward. "We were just discussing a similar sort of thing."

"Really?" Senator Rochelle tries to reinsert himself in the conversation. "Anything you care to share with us?"

Shaw frowns. "Not much to talk about," he says, and for a moment his eyes meet Lee's. "A round-up of dissidents who may be opposed to this mission. Simply a precaution."

"A wise idea." Rochelle quickly voices his approval. "I'm glad we were able to renew the Alien and Sedition Act in the last session. It only seemed prudent, given our current situation."

The current situation. As always, the Republic is under constant siege by its enemies, both abroad and within. The Commonwealth of New England,

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which still maintains armed troops at the borders of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. Pacifica, whose guerrilla army wages daily skirmishes with URS forces over disputed territory in the northern Sierra Nevada range. The European Commonwealth, which continues to enforce trade embargoes until the Republic agrees to remove its nukes from geostationary orbit. Meanwhile, alleged spies were being arrested every day, in cities and towns all over the country. Last night a high-school teacher was publicly hanged in Houston. One of her former students claimed that she was using a satphone to transmit information to France; although the accused repeatedly claimed innocence during her trial and the satphone was never found, the student was the son of a prominent Liberty Party official, and therefore his word was beyond question. The teacher's execution was carried out a few hours after the trial's completion and shown live on Govnet.

The president acknowledges the senator with only a vague nod; for the moment, he's disinterested in politics. He steps a little closer to the railing, his solemn eyes casually examining the gold braid on Lee's epaulets. "We have something in common, Captain," he quietly observes. "We're both named after famous ancestors."

"Yes sir, Mr. President." Lee continues to stare straight ahead. "Robert E. Lee was my great-grandfather, three gernerations removed." Or at least, so he's been told; in Virginia, nearly everyone whose last name is Lee presumes to be descended from the general who led the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Lee's claim to family ancestry is no more or less valid than anyone else's.

"Just as I'm descended from Alexander Hamilton, yes." The president reaches up to smooth a minute wrinkle on the left shoulder of Lee's uniform. "I'm curious . . . is there anything that General Lee ever said that strikes a chord with you? Something that has carried you to this place?"

Warmth curls around Lee's neck. Although the president doesn't look directly at him, he feels the eyes of everyone else in the room. Behind the president, Shaw watches him silently, his gaze never leaving his face.

"Yes, sir, he did." Lee's mouth is dry. "'Duty is the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should never wish to do less.'"

President Conroy raises his eyes to meet Lee's. For a few seconds that seem much longer he regards him with cool appraisal. A small vein pulses in his neck below his right ear; Lee finds himself watching it with an abstract sort of fascination.

Does he suspect? Has he learned of the conspiracy? Two days ago, Lee wrote a letter, addressed to both Elise and her father, which he stored in his desk's memory. The desk was instructed not to release its contents until after 2400 hours tomorrow night, but someone—Elise, the senator, the ISA—might have decrypted it. If they did . . .

"'Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness,'" the president says at last. "'Let the thirteen States, bound together in a dissoluble Union, concur in erecting one great American system, superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence, and able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world.'" He pauses. "Do you understand, Captain?"

"Yes sir, Mr. President."

"My great-grandfather, also several generations removed, wrote those

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words almost three hundred years ago, not long after this great country was founded in this very same room." The president speaks as if Lee hasn't said anything. "The conflicts were different then, but yet they remain much the same today. America is destined for greatness, and it's our responsibility to achieve its destiny in the stars themselves. Out there, the Republic shall become ageless. Immortal."

"Yes sir, Mr. President."

The president slowly nods. "You're doing a great service to this country, Captain. For this, the Republic owes its gratitude." His left hand moves from behind his back, extends across the railing. "God bless you, son. Good luck."

Lee has a sudden impulse to spit in his face. No one could have stopped him, not even the soldier standing behind him. Instead, he clasps the president's hand. His palm feels small and limp within his linen glove; Lee can't resist the impulse to give his a little more pressure than usual.

"Thank you, sir," he says. "I'll do my best."

The president winces, but smiles back at him, and it's in that instant Lee's last remaining doubts vanish. No more hesitation, no more second thoughts . . .

Tomorrow, he's going to steal the *Alabama*.

Huntsville 7.4.70 / T-26.30.38

The first fiery red chrysanthemum has just exploded above the Tennessee River when Jorge Montero's desk buzzes. Jorge doesn't hear it at first; he's out on the balcony with his family, enjoying the cool breeze that has come with the passing of the day, watching the skyrockets as they soar upward from the riverside several miles away. The delayed boom of the fireworks almost drowns out the phone from inside the house; it's his son who notices it first.

"Call, Papa." Carlos barely looks away as an orange blossom opens in the sky, its iridescent petals coruscating down around the holo of the single-star Republic flag looming above the modest Huntsville skyline.

Jorge grunts, pushes himself out of his chair. Rita gives him a little smile as he tromps past her to the glass-paneled door leading into the spare bedroom he's converted into a office; Marie is curled up in her lap, her head nestled against her mother's shoulder. "Hurry back," Rita murmurs. "You're going to miss it."

"It'll take just a second." Jorge had switched off the inside lights so that their eyes would become night-adapted; he almost tells the room to turn them back on again, but thinks better of it as he gropes his way through the dark office. A blue flash through the window illuminates his desk, making it a little easier to find, and he picks up the phone just as it buzzes a fourth time. "Hello?"

An anonymous voice. "Excuse me, is this the Jackson residence?"

Ice tickles the nape of his neck. "I'm sorry, no. You've got the wrong number."

"My mistake. Sorry." There's a click, then the dial tone.

Jorge's hand trembles as he puts down the phone. He stands alone in the office for a few moments, staring at nothing in particular, feeling his heart beat against his chest. Then he turns away from the desk, walks to the office

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door and opens it. Light from the upstairs hallway causes him to squint; he deliberately shuts his eyes as he quickly moves across the hall to Carlos's room. Fortunately, the kid has switched off the lights; Jorge goes to the window next to the bed and touches the stud that deopaques the glass.

Several coupes are parked on the street in front of their apartment house, yet none look unfamiliar or out of place. As he watches, though, a dark blue midi cruises down St. Clair. It slows to a crawl as it comes within sight of his building; as it passes beneath a street lamp he catches a brief glimpse through the windshield of two men. They're peering up at his apartment.

The midi pulls over to the curb. Its rear lights flash and its fan skirts billow as it settles to the ground, but the doors don't open. The car remains still, as if its driver is waiting for something.

Jorge opaques the window, takes a deep breath. Then he hurries back across the hall to his office. Another pyrotechnic flash from across the city, followed several seconds later by distant thunder. "Hello, desk," he says, careful to keep the office lights off. "I.D. Jorge, password totem pole."

"Good evening, Jorge." The wall behind the desk briefly displays the start-up screen before replacing it with a picture he had taken of Marie and Carlos in Big Spring Park one autumn afternoon last year. "Would you like to read your mail?"

"No." Jorge opens the closet, pulls out the canvas duffel bag he packed nearly a month ago. "Locate all files prefixed zero-two and erase. Password one-nine-gamma."

"Files located and erased." A pause. "You have a phone subroutine attached to this command. Do you wish for me to activate it now?"

"Yes, please. Password two-nine-epsilon." The desk would now place a call to the next person in the chain and repeat the same sequence of code-words he had heard only a couple of minutes ago, alerting that individual in the same way he had been warned. Jorge hopes that the person who called him had been able to make a clean getaway, and that the next guy in line will receive the signal in time.

No time to worry about that now. "Make another call. Phonebook number twelve, password six-zero-six. Send voxcard in memory, attach encrypted file prefixed zero-three-zero. Then erase all data from memory. That's all, desk." Without waiting for an acknowledgment, Jorge drops the bag on top of the books and disks stacked on his desk and crosses the room to the balcony. His wife and children are still watching the fireworks. Rita looks around as he opens the door.

"It's time," he says quietly.

Her mouth falls open and fear briefly crosses her face, then she quickly puts a clamp on her emotions before Marie notices. "All right, kids," she says, swinging their daughter off her lap as she stands up, "that's enough fireworks. Papa's got a big surprise for you."

"But I want to watch!" Marie wails. In the far distance, skyrockets sail upward two and three at a time, their crackling detonations overlapping one another: *poom! poppa-poppa-poom! poom!* "I don't wanna go!"

"It's almost over. Now we're going out for ice cream." Rita picks Marie up again, turns to Carlos. "C'mon, you too. We're all going."

Carlos looks away from the city, stares across the balcony at his father. Their eyes meet, and in that instant Jorge knows that the boy has guessed the truth. His son may only be thirteen, but he's far more mature than his years; a few weeks ago, Jorge had told him everything—at least, everything

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that he needed to know—and warned him that this moment might come. Now Carlos simply nods. "Sure," he says softly. "Sounds like fun."

Jorge gives him a reassuring nod as he steps aside to let Rita carry Marie through the door. The little girl's still fussing over missing the rest of the fireworks, but there's no time to comfort her now. He walks to the edge of the balcony, glances over the side. No one in the courtyard behind the apartment house, and his coupe is still parked in front of its recharger. "Seen anyone down there?" he murmurs as Carlos joins him at the railing.

"I haven't really been looking. No, I don't think so." The teenager is shaking. "Papa, that call . . ."

"It's begun." It figures the ISA would pick this day for their next crackdown; the mass-arrest of D.I.'s—"dissident intellectuals," to use a favorite Party expression—on the Fourth of July is sure to make every patriotic heart swell with pride. "We've got to hurry. Help Mama with Marie, will you?"

"Okay." Carlos hesitates. "Can we take anything?"

"Only the clothes on your back. Sorry." Carlos nods gravely, then heads for the balcony door. Jorge is about to follow him when an oval shadow passes across the balcony.

He looks up just in time to spot a floater moving past a floodlight on the cornice of the apartment house next door.

They're already too late. The prefects are closing in.

Rita has taken a moment to open the hall closet and wrap a light nylon jacket around Marie's shoulders. His daughter is on her own two feet now, but as petulant as only a five-year-old can be, stamping angrily and insisting that she doesn't want ice cream. His wife stares at Jorge as he comes out of the office, the canvas bag dangling from his left shoulder. Carlos emerges from his bedroom; he's grabbed a vest from his room, and Jorge catches a glimpse of something as he hides it in his pocket. Probably his pad; Carlos never goes anywhere without it. Jorge hopes it doesn't contain any incriminating information. Not that it matters; the court tends to reach a verdict first, then examine the evidence later, and then only if it cares to obey the letter of the Revised Constitution.

"All right." Jorge tries hard to sound carefree, if only for Marie's sake. "Let's go get some ice cream." Then he leads the way down the stairs to the entrance foyer.

The midi is still parked in front of the building, but now two men stand on the sidewalk in front of the vehicle. Neither wear the long grey coats of prefects, yet they silently observe the Montero family as they walk down the front steps and turn toward the alley leading to the rear courtyard. Just as they're about to walk around the side of the building, a police HV glides down the street.

"C'mon now. We don't want to be late." Jorge sweeps Marie off her feet, and the child giggles with delight as her daddy places her on his shoulders. "Ice cream . . . we're gonna have ice cream . . . ."

It's at that moment when the floodlights hit them, both in front and from behind.

"Stop!" The loudspeaker voice seems to come from all directions at once. "Don't move!"

Jorge raises a hand against the white-hot glare. From her perch, Marie screams: "Papa. . . !"

"Raise your hands! Don't try to run!"

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Rita huddles against his side. "Jorge. . . !"

Beyond the harsh light, the silhouettes of men running toward them, their footsteps loud against the pavement. From behind, a siren whoops as the HV rushes into the alley.

"Papa! What are they doing. . . ?"

Above him, the windows of the apartment house deopaque. Figures appear at the windows: their neighbors, whom Jorge knows by face but not by name, staring down at them. Then the windows go dark once more.

"Let me have her!" Rita claws at Marie's jacket. "Let me have her!"

Marie howls in terror as Jorge lifts her off his shoulders. Her left foot lightly kicks him in the face, and he barely has time to deposit his daughter in his wife's arms before someone grabs his wrist and twists it behind him.

"Wait a minute!" He instinctively yanks his arm free. "Hold on! My kids. . . !"

A baton slaps his stomach just above his kidney. A moment of exquisite pain as an electrical current passes through him, then all his muscles relax and he collapses. The back of his head strikes the cracked asphalt and now he lies in the driveway, paralyzed and dazed, watching with a distant sort of fascination as one of the men from the midi moves in upon Carlos. The kid tries to punch him, but he misses; the scuffle moves beyond his range of vision and all he sees are dark forms looming above him.

"Jorge. . . !"

One of the figures crouches closer, and the baton moves toward him again, the red light on its handle strobing against the night. Rita's screaming, Marie's screaming, and he can't see or hear Carlos any more.

The baton touches the side of his neck, and he plummets into black silence.

URSS *Alabama* 7.4.70 / T-24.01.00

She can't see the stars. The spotlights arrayed along the open trusswork of the dry-dock are too bright, and the only thing beyond them is the matte-black expanse of space. Even Earth itself is invisible; it's somewhere below the long cylindrical boom of the ship's primary structure, which stretches away until it meets the enormous drum of the main engine. A shame; there won't be many more opportunities for her to be alone before launch, and she would like to see Earth one last time.

Dana Monroe hovers in front of the broad window of Deck H5, watching service pods and dock workers in hardsuits as they move along the *Alabama*, making their inspections of the starship's five-hundred-foot hull. The window is situated on the lowest deck of the hub module, just below the primary airlocks and docking ports, and it's the only porthole that faces backward. All the other windows in the payload section, including those in the seven ring modules that encircle the hub, offer only side views, and none look forward: the view would have been blocked by the main fuel tank and the vast cone of the Bussard ramscoop.

Yet even as she surveys the prelaunch operations, Dana knows she's only killing time. As Chief Engineer, her list has a couple of hundred different duties—two hundred thirty-nine, to be exact—that she needs to perform over the next twenty-four hours, half of which have to be completed within the next twelve. Through her headset, she hears the mingled voices of her team murmuring to one another over the primary com channel. For the

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time being, though, she holds in place, awaiting one single message that will lead her to one all-important job. . . .

Dana switches her grip on the window rung from her left hand to her right. No sun-shadows on the dry-dock scaffolds; that means Highgate's equatorial orbit has taken it within Earth's night once more. If she was doing EVA right now and on tether outside the dock, she might be able to make out the Ursa Major constellation. If she couldn't see the place she was about to leave, then at least she could see where she was going. . . .

"Charlie Eagle, Charlie Eagle, this is Lima Oklahoma Ten. Do you copy?"

Dana gives her headset a gentle tap. "Charlie Eagle here. What's up?"

Lima Oklahoma is Launch Operations, the pillbox-shaped superstructure outside the main bay; Lima Cherokee Ten is the call-sign for the duty officer for this shift. "Dana, we just received a squib from Houston. A voxcard forwarded to you from someone in Pensacola, name of Arthur Monroe."

Dana's left eyebrow involuntarily tics. An old boyfriend once told her that it did that when she's nervous. "That's my uncle. Sure, put it through . . . vox only, please."

A moment passes, then she hears a reedy old man's voice: "Dana, it's your Uncle Art. I know you haven't heard from me in a long while, but I just wanted to let you know how proud I am of you, and that your family is wishing you all the best of luck. You're probably very busy just now, so you don't need to call back if you don't have to, but just remember that we love you very much . . . and that's all I wanted to say. Oh, and I'm sending you a picture to take with you. Goodbye, and may God be with you."

A brief pause, then the duty officer comes back online. "That's it. Do you want me to open the card?"

Dana's breath shudders as she let it out. "No thanks. Just download it to my pad. I'll look at it the next chance I get."

"Will do. Lima Cherokee Ten over."

"Thanks. Charlie Eagle out." She clicks off, borrows another moment to gaze through the window. Uncle Art's the family patriarch; her late mother's youngest brother, old enough to remember when black people in the South were sometimes called bad names. He's still alive, yet only a small handful of family members and close friends know that he now lives in a hospice in Pensacola. He's barely able to remember his own name, let alone send a lucid voxcard to his favorite niece.

Dana glances at a wall chronometer: 2400 EST, exactly as she anticipated. All the proper code phrases had been used. *Best of luck. Don't call back. File attached. Goodbye.*

Goodbye, indeed. One way or another, she's committed now.

She pushes away from the window, glides across the compartment to a ceiling hatch. She enters the hub access shaft, barely touching the ladder rungs as she floats upward through the ship's core. She passes Deck H4, where the command deck is located, and H3, the life-support center, and H2, the engineering section where her own team would be going about their business, until she reaches the hatch leading to H1, at the top of the shaft.

The outer pressure door is already open; Dana presses a stud on the bulkhead and the inner hatch bisects, revealing a short corridor leading to another hatch. She pauses to touch her headset again. "I'm in the ring, going off-line for a few minutes," she announces on the common frequency. "Be right back." She switches off the headset. No further explanation is necessary; everyone will assume that she's visiting the head.

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The corridor takes her to a circular passageway that leads to the ring modules. Dana floats to a hatch marked C2. Opening it, she glides through a manhole in the module.

C2 is one of the *Alabama*'s two hibernation modules: four decks stacked one atop the other, each deck containing fourteen biostasis cells. Folded down from their wall niches, their lids open, the fiberglass cells faintly resemble coffins, a similarity Dana finds unnerving. Through a window on the opposite side of the deck, Dana can see the dry-dock bay.

No time to waste; if she remains off-line for too long, someone in Launch Control might get suspicious. She moves to a console beneath the window, pulls out the recessed keypad, quickly taps instructions into the module's secondary computer system. A flatscreen lights, displaying the main menu; she touches the button marked *Program Install* and the screen shows a list of options beneath a password prompt. Dana enters her clearance number, then reaches into her pocket and pulls out her pad.

As she hoped, the duty officer has already downloaded the voxcard she received from "Uncle Art." She clips the pad against the console's serial port, then opens the photo that came attached to the voice-mail message. The picture that appears on the pad's screen is of Uncle Art's family, taken during a reunion picnic several years ago in Pensacola; what the casual viewer wouldn't know is that the digital image contains an encrypted file.

A few deft strokes and the information is fed into the computer's backup memory. Once it's in, Dana takes a few moments to decrypt the file and double-check its contents. Long, dense lines of information appear on the screen. Satisfied that the info is secure, she saves it in the system under a password, then unclips the pad from the console, stows away the keypad and shuts down the board. With luck, no one will ever know she's been here.

Dana climbs head-first down a ladder to the deck below, then enters a horizontal tunnel leading to the next module. C3 is one of the two modules devoted to crew quarters: racks of narrow bunks, tightly packed together between storage lockers. She's not looking forward to sharing close confines with a hundred and three other crew members; with luck they won't remain aboard the *Alabama* for very long after they come out of biostasis. She locates the head, takes a moment to flush its zero-gee commode. The minute change in water pressure will indicate to the duty officer that someone has just used the toilet on Deck C3B; this will help substantiate her alibi.

She lets out her breath. One more task completed. There will be more over the course of the next twenty-four hours, some even more difficult than this, but for now . . .

A sharp double-beep in her headset; someone's trying to page her. She switches the comlink back on. "Charlie Eagle, we copy."

"Charlie Eagle, Lima Cherokee Ten. Where are you right now?"

"Charlie Three Baker. Is there a problem?"

An uncertain pause. "Ahh . . . yeah, there is. We've detected a glitch in Charlie Two's backup computer. You know anything about this?"

Southern Georgia 7.5.70 / T-20.42.45

Gliding a couple of inches above its elevated track, the maglev passenger train races through the forested hill country south of Macon, its spotlight piercing the thin haze above the superconductive monorail. As it rushes

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past one of the innumerable shanty towns that fester in the countryside, a squatter warming himself by a trash can fire notices that the train has only two cars, and that they have steel slats bolted against their windows. He stares at the train long after it has vanished, silently reflecting on the fact that, as hard as his life has become, it could be much worse.

A sudden vibration awakens Jorge from his restless slumber. Raising his head from where he had propped it between the edge of the seat and the window, he studies the compartment with weary eyes. Crammed together in every available seat are men, women, and children. Most are asleep—wives huddled against husbands, kids dozing in their parents' laps—but some are awake. Staring through the window slats, they watch the occasional lights that swiftly pass by, their faces taut with anxiety, exhaustion, hopelessness. Precious little baggage in the overhead racks; only a handful managed to take anything when the prefects came for them. Judging from what precious little conversation Jorge has overheard, some of these people were taken off the street, arrested while leaving restaurants, shops, even their own homes.

D.I.'s, each and every one. Scientists, for the most part—Jorge knows most of these people by face if not by reputation—although scattered among them are also a few writers, artists, students, and various other individuals who present "a clear and present danger to national security," to use the ISA's favored term. There must be a couple of hundred people packed into this train; the prefects were busy this Fourth of July.

Marie's head lies cradled in Jorge's lap, her jacket wadded around her shoulders as a makeshift blanket. He tries not to disturb her as he raises his arm to glance at his watch. Almost 3:45 a.m.; they've been on the train for nearly five hours now, ever since they left Huntsville along with a few dozen other D.I.'s and their kin. No trial, no hearing; only a ride in the back of a government midi to the maglev station, where they were ushered aboard by armed soldiers. The train wasn't crowded until it reached Atlanta, then it made a long stop while more than a hundred more detainees were herded aboard, the grey-coated prefects on the platform carefully checking off each name on their pads. Now a soldier stands guard at each end of the compartment, rifle in hand, forbidding anyone to speak aloud. Nothing to do except sleep, and be afraid.

Camp Buchanan is their destination. Just north of the Florida state line in Valdosta is the Patrick J. Buchanan Education Center. Jorge has seen the Govnet propaganda for Camp Buchanan: clean, well-lighted dormitories where D.I.'s are allowed to live while they take classes intended to broaden their political awareness. Happy, well-nourished children playing tag while their parents sit at benches, eagerly asking questions of patient teachers. People in blue paper pajamas standing in line in the mess hall, patiently waiting for healthy food served up by smiling cooks. Heartfelt testimonials by former D.I.'s proclaiming the worthiness of the re-education program, repeatedly stating they were well-treated during their stay. But Jorge knows three former colleagues who were sent to Camp Buchanan, and he hasn't seen any of them since.

Across the aisle, Rita stirs, opens her eyes. Carlos is curled up next to her, his head on her shoulder. His wife looks around, sees Jorge, gives him a wan smile that he knows she doesn't feel. He wants to whisper something to her—an apology? a little late for that now!—but the last thing they need is to have one of the soldiers shouting at him, so all he can is give her is what

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he hopes is a comforting nod. Everything will be all right, everything's going to work out just fine. . . .

But it isn't. He knows that now. The ISA must have tumbled to the conspiracy. Why else would they have been arrested?

The train lurches again, a little harder this time, and now there's a gradual sense of deceleration. Are they already coming into Valdosta? Jorge peers through the window slats. Nothing except darkness, yet Valdosta is a large enough city that he should be able to see its lights. Nonetheless, the train is slowing down. . . .

Other passengers are waking up. Jorge catches the eye of an old friend seated two rows up: Henry Johnson, an astrophysicist who also used to work at Marshall Space Flight Center. He's known Henry since they were postgrad students at MIT, long before the Second Revolution; after that, they worked together on the Starflight Project, or at least until they signed a petition protesting the National Reform Program. The new government let them keep their jobs until the *Alabama* was finished, then they were publicly denounced as D.I.'s and cast out of the Federal Space Agency. Shortly after that, their citizenship was suspended, their voting rights revoked. They became non-citizens, left to fend for themselves as best they could.

Now Henry's on the train to Camp Buchanan, along with everyone else from Marshall who stood up to the Liberty Party and its social agenda. Six rows back is Bernie Cayle and his wife Vonda, and Jorge spotted Jim Levin on the platform at Huntsville just before he and his family were marched into the next car down. Henry silently gazes back at him, and as the train makes another lurch he slowly nods his head. Henry is more closely involved in the conspiracy than Jorge; the whole thing has been kept compartmentalized, so that if one person was arrested and interrogated by the prefects, he wouldn't be able to reveal all the details. Jorge isn't sure, but he believes Henry may be the leader. If he is, then . . .

"Papa? Are we stopping?" Marie has woken up; she raises her head from his lap, knuckles her sleep-wizened eyes.

"Shh. It's all right, sweetie. Just be quiet." Jorge strokes her hair, glances over his shoulder to see if the guard has heard them. Not that it matters; although passengers softly murmur to one another as they stare through the windows, for the moment the soldiers aren't paying attention. The one in the back of the train, a kid not very much older than Carlos, grabs a seatback to steady himself as he bends over to the nearest window. The soldier up front spreads his feet a little further apart; he yells at everyone to shut up, but there's a baffled expression on his face.

The train slows to a crawl, coasts down an incline. A series of metronomic bumps against the undercarriage as its wheels engage the track; now Jorge can see a sparse handful of lights from directly ahead. Warehouses trundle past the windows; they're coming into an industrial park somewhere north of Valdosta, a rail yard meant for freight trains. Perhaps they're taking aboard more D.I.'s. Yet when he glances at Henry again, his friend's face is carefully neutral. Jorge has seen that secretive look before. He knows something. . . .

The train comes to a halt. "Shut up!" the soldier up front yells. "Stay where you are! Don't move!" He gestures for the other soldier to come forward; the kid walks to the center of the compartment, his rifle at ready, as his sergeant retreats into the accessway. A faint thump, then a blast of cool

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air from outside. The passengers on the other side of the compartment watch through the windows as the sergeant steps off the train.

Marie looks at Jorge, her eyes wide with fear. *What's going on?* she silently mouths. Carlos is awake now, his gaze flitting between the window and the soldier standing only a few feet away. The soldier turns his back to him, and, for an instant, Jorge sees a wild impulse dart through his son's eyes. He urgently shakes his head, and the boy reluctantly settles down.

A minute passes, then another. Three, four. . . . Footsteps on the stairs, and the sergeant steps back into the compartment, followed by a prefect. Young, tall, fit; callous eyes in a handsome face. The ISA officer studies the passengers with much the same sort of loathing a chef would feel toward cockroaches he's found in his kitchen, then he pulls out a pad and flips it open.

"The following individuals and their families will accompany me," he says. "Exit from the rear, and no talking. Abbott, Francis K. . . . Arnold, Alice C. . . . Burstein, David C. . . ."

One by one, people rise and stagger down the center aisle, their legs cramped and numb. Bernie and Vonda Cayle leave the train; a minute later, Henry Johnson follows them. Everyone on the list is a former Marshall scientist, so it's no surprise when, just a few seconds after the Levins have been called, Jorge hears his own name.

"Papa, where are we going?" Marie's hand is tiny within his own, terribly vulnerable.

"Shh. I'll tell you later." Jorge lets Marie and Carlos get in front of them, then he reaches up to pull his heavy bag down from the overhead rack. The young soldier sneers at him as he picks Marie up and carries her down the aisle.

The night is colder than he expected, dark save for the lights above the warehouses. An unmarked government maxvee is parked next to the train, a loading ramp lowered from its rear cargo door. Two soldiers stand near the vehicle, silently watching the D.I.'s as they line up to board the vehicle. Still holding Marie in his arms, Jorge nervously looks around, spots Jim and Sissy Levin standing a few yards behind them, their children between them.

The prefect who called their names steps down off the train. He walks over to the max, glances at the D.I.'s already inside, then does a quick headcount. Jorge estimates that about forty-five people have been taken off the maglev, including spouses and children. Just about everyone who had boarded in Huntsville, plus a few from Atlanta. The remaining hundred or so passengers stare at them through the windows. They're destined to continue south to Camp Buchanan; it's impossible to tell whether they envy the ones who've been pulled from the train or pity them.

Another prefect disembarks from the second car. He walks over to his companion; they compare their lists, murmuring quietly to one another. The line shuffles slowly forward, the people in front ducking their heads as they march up the ramp into the max.

The vehicle is even more cramped than the train; everyone squeezes together on its hard plastic benches. No windows. Through a grate-covered window in the front of the compartment they can see the back of the driver's head; he glances around once to watch the people coming aboard, then looks away again. Rita puts Marie in her lap to make a little more room.

When the last D.I. has finally come aboard, the prefect who called their names from the train marches into the vehicle. Pulling a stunner from with-

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in his coat, he regards everyone with cold scrutiny, as if challenging them to attack him. When no one says anything, he takes an empty seat at the rear, then motions for the soldiers to close the rear hatch. They hesitate, then pick up the ramp and shove it back into its slot. The hatch slams shut.

Long silence, then the maxvee whines to life. Everyone is jostled against one another as the vehicle picks itself off the ground. Jorge can't see the rail yard as the max coasts away

"All right," the prefect says quietly. "I think we're safe."

Everyone stares at him. What did he just say? Then Henry Johnson clears his throat. "Did it work?" he asks quietly.

Jorge looks first at him, then at the prefect. Incredibly, he's putting away his gun. Rita's mouth is wide open; she doesn't know what to make of this any more than anyone else in the max . . . all save Henry, who briefly favors Jorge with a broad grin.

"Well done, everyone," he says. "Especially you. Nice performance." The prefect nods, trying not to smile, then Henry sharply claps his hands to break through the cacophony of voices all around them. "Okay, everyone calm down, take it easy. Sorry we had to put you through this. . . ."

"What the hell are you trying to do?" This from Bernie Cayle, sitting near the front of the vehicle. "Goddammit, Hank, you scared the shit out of . . ."

"Bernie, please," Henry says. "Watch your language. There're children present."

Laughter, relieved and out of place, ripples through the max. Oddly enough, only the handful of kids seem unruffled. Maybe they're still half-asleep, or perhaps they figured out this was a hoax long before the adults did.

"Like Dr. Johnson says, I'm sorry we . . . I had to do this." Everyone quiets down as the prefect stands up in the back of the vehicle. "If more of you had known about this in advance, it wouldn't have worked. We had to find a way to collect everyone on short notice, and this was the best way we could manage. This way, we're perfectly legit."

"What do you mean, legit?" someone in the back demands. "What are you. . . ?"

"Right now, y'all are being taken to Little Rock, where you're scheduled for ISA interrogation. That's our alibi for taking you off the train." The prefect raises a hand. "It's complicated, I know. Just bear with us."

Silence now, as everyone takes this in, yet Jorge is beginning to understand. There's aspects of the plot of which he hasn't been informed, but now it's all coming together. . . .

"So where are we going?" Rita looks first at the prefect, then Henry, then finally Jorge. "If it's not Camp Buchanan or Little Rock . . ."

"A lot further than you think," Jorge says quietly.

Merritt Island 7.5.70 / T-17.10.39

The rising sun has painted the sky with shades of magenta and burnt orange, lening a silver tint to the blue-grey surf rushing against the beaches of Merritt Island. Closer, the *Alabama*'s shuttles await takeoff on their concrete launch pads; fuel trucks are parked nearby, while ground crew makes final inspections on the twin delta-winged spaceplanes.

Captain Lee takes in the view from a wall screen in a briefing room with-

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in the Crew Training Facility, wishing he could be out there right now, if only for one last taste of salt air. But that's clearly out of the question; the sea breeze is filthy with microorganisms, and he's already undergone decontamination procedures. The world is now beyond his reach, behind the hermetically sealed doors of the quarantine area. In a few minutes he's to join the rest of his crew; right now, though, he has one last duty to perform on Earth.

A soft click from behind him, then the faint whoosh of pressurized air as the door glides open. Lee reluctantly turns from the wallscreen as two men enter: Ben Aldrich, closely followed by Roland Shaw. They're wearing white paper coveralls and caps, their hands covered with latex gloves; both men had to be decontaminated before they were allowed to pass through two sets of airlocks leading to this bare, unfurnished room. His last face-to-face contact with anyone from Earth who doesn't wear a helmet.

"Morning, Robert," Aldrich says. "Ready for the big day?"

Lee gives the Launch Supervisor a tight smile. "That's not for another 226 years. Ask me again when I get to 47 Uma B."

Aldrich grins back at him. "Maybe it'll be only 226 years for you, but it'll feel like 230 for me." He turns to the Republic's Director of Internal Security. "Not that it makes much difference, but if he'd made that sort of mistake during training, I would've found someone else for the job."

Shaw barely acknowledges the jest; indeed, Lee wonders if he fully appreciates the effects of time dilation. Once the *Alabama* achieves its maximum cruise velocity of .2*c*, time aboard the starship will slow relative to the rest of the universe. Add three months for acceleration to 20-percent lightspeed after leaving Earth and another three months for magsail deceleration into the 47 Ursae Majoris system, and the ship's internal chronometers will record a passage of little more than 226 years, while back home the voyage will have lasted nearly four years longer. The Lorentz factor will matter very little to him or anyone else aboard the *Alabama*, since they'll be in biostasis during most of the journey, but it's highly doubtful that Shaw will still be alive by then, even with the benefit of life-extension treatments.

"I don't think you could have found anyone better." Once again, Shaw's manner is as stiff as it had been last night when Lee saw him with the president. "I'm sure the captain wants to be with his people right now. Perhaps we should get along with our business."

"Yes, of course." Aldrich is clearly nervous in the presence of the Director of Internal Security. He reaches into a pocket of his coveralls, pulls out his pad, flips open the cover. "Okay, then . . ."

The briefing is a routine run-down of the major events of the next seventeen hours. At 1000 EDT, the URSS *Jesse Helms*, piloted by First Officer Shapiro and carrying the forty-five members of the *Alabama*'s flight team not already aboard the starship, is scheduled to lift off from Pad 10, with an ETA of 1230 with the *Alabama*. Pending successful rendezvous and docking of the *Helms*, the *George Wallace* will launch at 1300 from Pad 11, carrying the 51 members of the *Alabama*'s colonization team, with Captain Lee himself as pilot. Its anticipated rendezvous and docking is scheduled for 1430; by then fuel load-up will have been completed by 1400. At 1500 the main hatches will be sealed, and the crew will go through prelaunch procedures until 2345, when the president will publicly address the nation via netv from Atlanta. Following the president's speech, final countdown will commence at 2350; if all goes well, primary booster ignition will be at 2400.

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"We had a small problem early this morning." Aldrich studies his pad. "Launch Control detected an error in the backup computer system in Module C2 shortly after 2400 last night. . . ." Lee feels his heart skip a beat. ". . . but the Chief Engineer checked it out and found that it was just a faulty program alarm. It's been fixed and countdown was resumed at 0014."

"Good. Glad to hear it." Lee pretends a calmness he doesn't feel. Something must have gone wrong, but it sounds as if Dana managed to take care of it without tipping her hand. "Anything else?"

"Nothing. We're right on schedule." Aldrich closes his pad, looks at Shaw. "Your turn, Mr. Shaw."

"Thank you." The DIS has remained quiet through all this; now he unzips the black plastic pouch he carried into the room, pulls out a small object wrapped in clear cellophane. "Captain Lee, I don't think I have to tell you what this is."

"No, sir." Lee takes the packet, opens it, pulls out a large chrome-plated key on a neck chain: the launch key for the *Alabama*'s primary ignition system. Without it, the ship's main engines cannot be fired. A security precaution to prevent the *Alabama* from being launched without direct authorization from the president.

"Thank you, sir." Lee clips the chain around his neck, lets the key slide down the front of his jumpsuit. It's only now that the ISA has seen fit to entrust it to the Mission Commander; during dress rehearsals in orbit, a prefect has always been in the *Alabama*'s command deck to insert the key and turn it, even though the main engines were never started. Yet this is supposed to be a symbolic moment, so Lee snaps to attention and salutes Shaw.

Shaw responds with a salute of his own, then offers his hand. "Good luck, Captain. All our prayers go with you."

Lee looks straight at Shaw as he clasps his hand, yet there's nothing in his expression that the captain can read. Shaw simply nods, ever so slightly, then he turns to Aldrich. "I believe you have something to add. . . ."

"Yes, sir, there is." As Aldrich steps forward again, he pulls from beneath his arm a large parcel sealed in plastic. Through the transparent wrapping, Lee can see a single white star embroidered on a field of dark blue canvas, bordered by red and white horizontal stripes. The flag of the United Republic of America.

Aldrich handles it reverently, almost as if reluctant to give it up; when he looks up at Lee, his eyes are moist. "I know you've already got one of these aboard," the Launch Supervisor says quietly, his voice raw at the edges, "but this one comes from all of us here at the Cape. If you wouldn't mind, Captain, we'd like for you to raise it on the new world once you get there . . . in our honor, please."

Lee feels a hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. Ben means well, and Lee has nothing against him, yet the last thing he ever wants to see again is this flag: a symbol of a totalitarian government that has taken everything America once stood for and twisted it beyond recognition. One star to signify one people, or so it has been stated; what it really stands for is one party, one political ideology. The purpose of this mission isn't exploration, as originally intended before the Second Revolution, but conquest. He's being sent to 47 Ursae Majoris not to expand the horizons of humankind, but to establish an interstellar colony which will insure the immortality of the Republic. Millions of people now live in shacks made of discarded junk and cook squirrel stew over manure fires because so much of

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his country's resources have been diverted to the construction of a starship. One of humankind's most noble dreams, now perverted. . . .

"Robert?" Aldrich stares at him. "Is there something wrong?"

"Sorry." Lee takes a deep breath. "Just thinking about this moment, that's all." He accepts the wrapped flag from Aldrich, bows slightly, gives him what he hopes the other man will interpret as a modest smile. "Thank you. I'll put this in a place of honor."

Aldrich bows formally. "Thank you, Captain. May God be with you."

Lee gives the Launch Supervisor a farewell handshake, lets him enjoy this last moment of pride. And all the while, he feels Roland Shaw's eyes upon him.

Titusville 7.5.70 / T-14.00.05

Three seconds before the countdown reaches zero, reddish-orange flames erupt from the shuttle's ascent engines, followed by billowing brown plumes that quickly envelop the spacecraft. For a second the spaceplane can barely be seen, then the *Jesse Helms* slowly rises from the thick haze. Microphones pick up the sound of people cheering, then the crackling thunder ripples across the VIP viewing area three miles from the launch pad, drowning out their voices as the camera pans upward, tracking the white-glare. A thousand feet above the ground, the shuttle's nose tilts upward, then its NIF main engines kick in and the spacecraft suddenly vaults into the blue heavens above the Atlantic.

"The g's will still be nominal at this point." Henry Johnson nods toward the dusty old flatscreen above the bar. "There'll be some discomfort once they reach seven g's, but that lasts for only about a minute or so."

"You don't think the kids will be hurt?" Jim Levin glances uncertainly across the closed-down restaurant. His two children, David and Chris, are sitting on the floor with Carlos and Marie Montero; they're playing scissors-rock-paper, from the looks of it. "My youngest gets motion-sickness when he's on the plane."

"I'm sure a lot of us are going to be throwing up." Jorge is still watching the screen. The *Helms* itself is now visible only as a tiny white spot at the head of a long contrail. He's tempted to step outside to see if he can spot it with the naked eye, but the rules are firm; no one leaves the restaurant until they're ready to go. "Don't worry about it. I've been up before. It's an easy ride."

The screen switches to a young woman standing at the press site: a Govnet correspondent, delivering a recount of what they've just seen, the liftoff of the shuttle carrying the members of the *Alabama*'s flight team. The volume is turned down low, so only a handful of the people gathered in the abandoned restaurant on the outskirts of Titusville can hear her. "Just as long as we've got a vomit bag for my boy," Jim murmurs. "Otherwise we're going to have a hell of a . . ."

"Hush," Henry says as the image changes once more. "Here it comes. . . ."

A video replay from an hour ago: the walkout from the Crew Training Facility within the Gingrich Space Center. A door opens, then the flight team walks out. Striding single-file past the journalists and cameramen gathered behind a rope, they wear one-piece isolation suits, their features barely visible through the faceplates of their fabric helmets. Among the adults are

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several children of various ages, distinguishable as minors only because of their shorter stature. They wave to the bystanders as they stroll past the camera toward the white FSA maxvee parked less than thirty feet away.

"See?" Henry murmurs. "No questions, no interviews. . . ."

"No I.D. checks." Jorge glances over his shoulder at him, sees Bernie Cayle gnawing at a fingernail. Of all the people gathered in what used to be called the Lamplighter Grill, he's the most nervous. As if any of them could be described as calm. "But what if someone recognizes . . . I mean, if they don't recognize. . . ?"

"Look how they're dressed." Jim gestures to the screen. "You can barely see their faces."

"Uh-huh. So long as everyone stays in motion, it'll be over and done in just a few seconds." And just as Henry says, the last crew member boards the maxvee less than a minute after the first one emerged from the building. A soldier shuts the door behind him, and a moment later the vehicle rises from the ground, turns away from the camera, and skims down the road leading to the launch pad. "See? Easy."

"So why can't we. . . ?" Bernie hesitates, trying to articulate his thoughts. "I mean, can't we just head straight for the pad? We've got our own suits, so why do we have to go through. . . ?"

"Bernie . . ." Jim lets out an impatient breath. He's already explained everything to everyone, but for some reason Bernie still doesn't get it. "Look . . . for one thing, if we don't do the walkout, everyone will wonder why the colonists haven't appeared. Second, we have to ride that particular max out to the pad. We can't take the one we have, because . . ."

Jorge has heard this before. He excuses himself to check on his family. The restaurant smells of mildew and rotting wood; the windows have been long-since boarded up, so the only light comes from the camp lanterns scattered around the dining room where locals used to enjoy Friday night all-you-can-eat buffet dinners. He wonders again how the underground managed to gain access to this condemned highway inn, but decides it's one more question better left unasked. Even now, no one wants to divulge secrets. Further evidence that more people are involved in this conspiracy than he realized.

He finds Rita seated at the folding table at the far end of the room, her face scrunched up as she receives one of the antibiotic injections everyone has to take. Jorge knows the doctor giving the shots: Kuniko Okada, formerly the senior space medicine researcher at Marshall before she, too, signed the petition which got her labeled as a D.I. There's no way a clean-room facility can be set up here, but at least they can make sure no one carries any viruses aboard the *Alabama*.

"Okay, you're done," Dr. Okada says, and Rita sighs as she pulls down the sleeve of her shirt. "Bring your children over, and I'll do them next." Then she looks up and sees Jorge. "Wait a minute . . . I haven't taken care of you yet, have I?" When Jorge shakes his head, Kuniko turns back to Rita. "On second thought, let Jorge go first. If your kids see their dad doing this, maybe they'll take it a little easier."

"Good idea." Carlos won't mind a few shots, but Marie has always been a problem at the pediatrician's office. Jorge sits down in the chair Rita has just left and rolls up his right sleeve. "Of course, it might help if you've got a sucker. My daughter expects one when she goes to the doctor."

Kuniko shakes her head as she fits a clean needle and another cartridge

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into her syringe gun. "Sorry. No food for anyone from here on out. I don't like it either . . . I could use a cup of coffee right now." She checks Jorge's name on her list. "After this, you can help your wife get the kids in their isolation suits."

Jorge nods. The crowd in the dining room has gradually thinned over the last hour; after they've received their shots, everyone has gone into the kitchen nearby. When he peered through the swinging doors a few minutes ago, he saw that shower curtains had been draped from the ceiling pipes, forming makeshift changing rooms. One by one, people took folded garments behind the partitions, and emerged a few minutes later wearing one-piece coveralls. Whoever made the isolation suits had done their job well; they're identical to the ones he had just seen the flight crew wearing during walkout, right down to the Republic shoulder flag and the *Alabama* mission patch.

"You managed to send the medical data, didn't you?" Kuniko asks quietly as she dabs alcohol on his biceps.

"Just before we left." The voxcard sent to Houston from his desk contained encrypted medical records for everyone gathered in this room; Kuniko would need them to reprogram the *Alabama*'s biostasis cells. "It should have been received and downloaded by now."

"Should be." Kuniko sighs, massages her eyelids. "Just one more thing that could go wrong between . . ."

"Look! Papa's getting his shots!" Jorge turns around, sees Rita shepherding their children to the end of the table. Carlos looks bored, but Marie's eyes are wide with terror. "See how easy it is?"

"Sure, there's nothing to . . ." Jorge starts to say, then Kuniko takes that moment to jab the barrel of the syringe-gun against his arm and squeeze the trigger. Jorge tries not to wince as he feels the sting of the needle, and he forces a smile as he looks back at her. "Hey, did you just do something? I didn't feel anything!"

Kuniko gives him a faint smile as she changes needles and cartridges again. "As painless as can be." Marie hides her face against her mother's side, and Jorge decides not to press the issue. Marie will just have to suffer through this, that's all. . . .

The prefect who had taken them off the train outside Valdosta emerges from the kitchen. He's no longer wearing his grey overcoat, and his tie is askew around the collar of his shirt. He whistles sharply between his fingers, then claps his hands for attention. "Listen up!" he yells, and the room goes quiet as everyone looks toward him. "We've only got twenty minutes before we've got to be out of here, and we still haven't taken care of half of you. If you haven't had your shots, form a line behind the table, then proceed to the kitchen for suit-up. We're running out of time, so let's get going here, okay?"

Rita gives the prefect a cold glare. "He could be a little more . . ."

"Honey," Jorge murmurs, then clenches his teeth as Kuniko hits him with another shot. Marie seems a little less afraid; now she watches with morbid fascination as Kuniko exchanges needles and cartridges one more time. The prefect crosses the room to where Henry, Bernie, and Jim are gathered in front of the screen. He says something to them, and Jim and Bernie leave the bar to join the line forming behind Rita, yet Henry stays behind. As Jorge watches, his friend pulls out his pad and opens it. The prefect steps around behind him to peer over his shoulder. Something's going on. . . .

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Another swift jab, and he's done. "Boy, that was great!" he exclaims as he stands up from the chair. "Thanks, Doc! I feel better already!" He bends over to Marie, slaps his hands against his thighs. "C'mon, you gotta try this!"

The dubious expression on his daughter's face tells him that she isn't buying any of it, but she allows Rita to escort her to the chair. Jorge waits until Kuniko swabs her arm, then asks her if she can spell her mother's name backward. Marie is still working on the second letter when the doctor gives her the first shot. She yelps, but more out of surprise than from actual pain; Jorge decides that Rita can handle things from here, then he quietly slides away and heads over to the bar.

"If they're coming, they'd be here by now," Henry says to the prefect as Jorge draws closer. "But we've still got twenty minutes. . . ."

"We've got twenty minutes, but you know as well as I do that . . ." The prefect looks up, sees Jorge approaching. "Can I help you?"

"Who's coming?" Jorge asks, keeping his voice low. "Is there someone else?"

Henry hesitates, then shows the pad to Jorge: a long list of names, nearly every one highlighted, yet a few remain unlit. "We've got forty-five," he says quietly. "There's supposed to be fifty. Five remain unaccounted for. They were supposed to be on the train, but it doesn't look like they were picked up."

"Or they were picked up, but weren't taken to the train. And that's what worries me." The prefect absently rubs the beard stubble on his chin. "Not good. Not good at all. . . ."

"They wouldn't break . . ."

"Anyone can be broken. Trust me on that one." The prefect glances at the line of people standing in front of the table. From behind him, Jorge hears Marie's high-pitched scream as she's given another injection. "Never mind. Let's just get these people out of here."

"You don't think. . . ?"

"Just hope no one does a head-count during the walkout." The prefect shakes his head, turns away. "C'mon. The clock's running out."

"He shouldn't mind," Jorge murmurs once he's out of earshot. "He's getting a seat, after all."

Henry doesn't look up from his pad. "He's not coming with us," he says very quietly. "We gave him a chance, but he opted to stay behind . . . he has to, the way all this is planned." Then his eyes meet Jorge's. "When . . . if his people find out what he's done, they'll put him on trial for treason."

Jorge stares at him. "But why would he. . . ?"

"Asked him that once myself. He wouldn't tell me." Henry slaps the pad shut, turns to join the line at the table. "Don't say anything about it, though, to him or anyone else. It's something personal."

Rita has already escorted the kids into the kitchen; Jorge can hear her behind one of the curtains, coaxing Marie into one of the child-size isolation suits. Almost everyone has had their shots and donned their garments; now they're crowded together in the pantry, gazing through the restaurant's rear door. Just outside is the government maxvee that had picked them up in southern Georgia. The driver stands next to the vehicle, and Jorge notices that he's changed clothes; now he's wearing the uniform of a URS lieutenant. Another nameless man facing death for what he's doing today. . . .

Sissy Levin hands Jorge a folded suit, motions him toward the nearest changing room. Just as he's about to enter, Carlos comes out from behind

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the curtain. He's put on his isolation suit, and carries his helmet under his arm. "How do I look?"

"Fine. Just great." Jorge gives his son a quick inspection. "How're you holding up there, *muchacho?*"

"Okay, I guess." Yet his face is pale, his shoulders visibly shaking beneath the coveralls. "I don't know about this. . . ."

"I know. I'm not crazy about it either." Jorge bends down on one knee, looks Carlos straight in the eye. He's never lied to his boy before, and he isn't going to start now. "It sounded like a good idea when we were putting it together, but that was kind of in the abstract. Now we're here, and . . . well, it's going to be tougher than I thought."

"Then . . ." Carlos glances at the people waiting by the delivery entrance. For a moment, they're alone; no one is paying attention to them. "We don't have to do this, do we? I mean, we don't have to get to go . . ."

"You know of another way out of this?" Carlos's mouth trembles, but he doesn't say anything. "Son, we're escaped criminals now. The government's undoubtedly frozen my credit account, so we've got no money, and we can't go home even if we could. If we turn ourselves in . . ."

"I know that!" Carlos's voice rises, and several people standing nearby turn to look their way. Jorge hastily shushes him. "Papa . . . it's forty-six light-years away. . . ."

"I know, I know. . . ." Jorge shakes his head, then grasps his son by the shoulders. "But it's either this, or we spend the rest of our lives in a D.I. camp. You, me, your mother, your little sister . . . you want to see Marie in Camp Buchanan?" Carlos snuffles back tears, looks down at the floor. "Believe me, there's no other way. If there were, I'd . . ."

A sharp whistle from behind them. "Hey, someone leave something behind?"

Jorge glances over his shoulder, sees the prefect standing in the doorway of the dining room. He's holding aloft Jorge's duffel bag. "Someone dropped this," he calls out. "Who does it belong to?"

Damn. He had almost forgotten it. Jorge raises his hand. The prefect sees him, then marches across the kitchen to where he's crouched with Carlos. "If it's yours, you can't bring it with you," he says, still swinging the bag by its strap. "Sorry, no personal belongings."

"Those aren't personal belongings. It's something we need."

Surprised at having his authority challenged, the prefect stares back at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Rita and Marie coming out from behind the curtain. Marie's suit is a size too large for her; its leggings rumple down around the tops of her boots, and it seems as if she could crawl out from within the loose collar.

"Something you need. Man, everyone has something they need." The prefect drops the bag on the floor. "Okay, open 'er up, let's see what you've got."

Jorge hesitates, then unzips the bag and pulls it open, revealing its contents.

The prefect bends down, studying what's inside. He frowns, looks up at Jorge. "You really thought about this, didn't you?" he asks, his voice now so low only Jorge and Carlos can hear him. Jorge doesn't say anything, and the prefect reluctantly nods. "Okay, you can take it," he says quietly. "When we do the walk-out, sling it over your right shoulder, so that it's away from the people standing behind the rope. If someone notices and asks you what you've got, pretend you didn't hear. Just keep walking. Got it?"

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Jorge nods, and the prefect checks his watch. "Hurry up and get dressed. We leave in six minutes." Then he turns away, clapping his hands once more. "C'mon, people, hustle . . . !"

Carlos stares at his father as he zips the bag shut again. "Papa, what did you. . . ?"

"Never mind. Just go help your mother and sister." Jorge hands the bag to his son. "Keep an eye on this, will you? It's important . . . but don't show it to anyone."

Carlos takes the bag by its strap, pulls it over his shoulder. He slumps a little beneath its weight, and his expression changes from fear to puzzlement. For a moment Jorge wonders whether he's going to open it, but the boy obeys him. Jorge gives him a smile, then steps behind the curtain.

Alone for the moment, he sags against the cinder-block wall. He shuts his eyes, takes a deep breath, tries to will his heart to stop pounding. This is the first time since he received the phone call at his apartment that he's been out of sight of his family; until now, he hasn't allowed himself to show fear, let alone feel it. Yet deep down inside, he's just as terrified as Carlos. How can Rita accept all this so calmly, when she didn't know what was happening until. . . ?

No. He doesn't have time for this now. Jorge opens his eyes, takes another deep breath, then sits down on the plastic chair and begins removing his shoes. Beyond the curtain, he hears Rita begging Marie to stay still and stop fidgeting so much.

No choice. They're committed now. All of them.

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"He wants to *what?*" Dana stares at the com officer in disbelief. "You mean *now?*"

"Nothing I can do about it, Chief." Les Gillis carefully keeps a hand cupped around his headset mike. "He's already on the way over."

"For the love of . . ." Dana turns to another officer seated a few feet away. "Can you confirm that?"

"See for yourself." Sharon Ullman has already punched up a real-time image on the nav table; a holographic wire-model of the *Alabama* appears above the table, surrounded by Highgate's skeletal bay. Most of the service pods have already moved away from the ship, although a fuel barge still holds position beneath the main tank. As Dana watches, a small cylindrical craft moves through the bay, heading toward *Alabama*.

"OTV has requested clearance for docking at SC2," Gillis says. "I don't think the colonel's going to take no for answer."

Not now, God. Please, for the love of all that's holy, don't do this to me now. Dana and Les share a wary look; Sharon's one of the handful of crew members who isn't in on this, so they can't talk freely. "What's the present ETA for the *Helms?*" she asks.

"ETA at 1230, on schedule." Sharon expands the holo to display the distant shuttle on final approach for low-orbit rendezvous with the *Alabama*. "They're docking at SC2 in ten minutes."

"Okay." Dana takes a deep breath, tries to calm herself down. "Les, inform the OTV driver I want him in and out by 1225 max, and if he hits my ship I'm going to . . . never mind. Just remind him that the *Helms* needs to use SC2,

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and any delay is going to screw up the countdown." She releases the ceiling rail, pushes herself toward the deck hatch. "If you need me, I'll be in H5."

The orbital transfer vehicle has arrived by the time she makes it to the EVA ready-room; through the window next to the egress hatch she watches as the craft gently moves into the shuttle cradle. A slight bump as its blunt forward end mates with the docking collar; a half-minute later the tiger-striped inner hatch irises open. The five men who emerge wear URS military fatigues, their flechette rifles strapped to their shoulders. One by one, they push themselves into the EVA compartment, clamping the toes of their boots within the foot restraints. Although Dana is herself an Academy graduate, she never saw combat duty before she transferred to the Federal Space Agency. These men, she knows just from looking at their faces, are seasoned pros, hardened by tours in Cuba and the Sierra Nevadas. Bad mofos and proud of it.

The last man through the hatch is Col. Gilbert "Gill" Reese, something of a legend within the service and now leader of the URS security detachment aboard Highgate. Reese is built like a bull: thick arms, thick legs, thick neck. Thick head, too, or at least that's Dana's private opinion after having dealt with him several times already.

Seeing her, Reese gives Dana a smile that borders on being a smirk. Before she can say anything, he turns to the soldier nearest to the hatch and cocks his thumb at it. The soldier closes the outer hatch and dogs it tight, pounds his fist against it twice, then stabs the button that seals the inner hatch. A hollow thump, then the deck shudders slightly as the OTV disengages from the docking collar. Through the window, Dana catches a glimpse of the ferry moving away. Reese makes a show of checking his watch.

"It's 1225 on the nose," he says, not looking at her. "Satisfied, Chief Engineer?"

A snicker from one of the soldiers behind her. Dana pretends not to notice. "No, Colonel, I'm not. In fact, I want you to bring that OTV back here and put your men aboard."

Reese raises an eyebrow. "Wouldn't that throw you off schedule?"

"We'll make up for it." She stares straight back at him, refusing to give an inch.

Reese shrugs. "Then you won't mind if we stay awhile. Wouldn't want you to leave us without a proper farewell."

Again, the smirk. More muffled laughter from his troops. The colonel gives them a stern look, yet there's dark amusement in his eyes. Dana feels her face growing warm. "Why are you here, Colonel?"

"Glad you asked. Saves us a lot of time." The smile disappears. "We've received word that there may be a conspiracy against this mission."

Dana feels her left eyelid involuntarily twitch. "A conspiracy? Where have you heard. . . ?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss the details, ma'am. All I can say is that my orders come from the top. My people are to remain aboard the *Alabama* until its entire complement has arrived and prevent any unauthorized personnel from entering the ship." Reese never looks away from her. "I hope you don't mind, considering the circumstances."

It takes all of her willpower to keep her voice even. "Yes, sir, I do mind. These people coming aboard have been under strict quarantine since 0600, with no outside contact permitted with anyone. Your men haven't been sterilized, have they?"

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Reese's face stiffens. The soldiers aren't chuckling now. "Chief, my orders . . ."

"And my orders are to get the *Alabama* safely underway, on time, on schedule. This entire ship has just undergone a twenty-four-hour decontamination procedure. No one except the flight crew has been permitted through that hatch. The moment your men came aboard, they broke quarantine." Despite her fear, Dana is surprised to find a thin current of anger rising up from deep within her. "You want authorization? Let's get authorization. Put a call through to Houston and talk to the Flight Director. Or better yet, let's call Atlanta and get the president on the phone."

Dana can't believe she's doing this. For all she knows, Reese's orders could be coming straight from Peachtree House. Yet even as she throws the challenge at the colonel, she knows the bluff worked; Reese stares at her in mute surprise, and his squad has become dead silent. For a moment he doesn't say anything; when he does, his voice is low. "I don't think that'll be necessary. But my orders . . ."

"Fine. I understand." All at once, a new thought occurs to her. "I respect your concerns, Colonel," she says, softening her tone a little. "Really, I do . . . just as I hope you respect mine."

As if on cue, there's another dull impact against the outer hull. She doesn't have to look around to know that the *Helms* has just hard-docked with the *Alabama*. Good. "Your guys can remain here until 1500," she continues. "That's when we close the hatches. But they can't leave this deck, and they can't make physical contact with anyone coming aboard. Agreed?"

Dana knows what Reese really wants to do: place his men throughout the *Alabama*, and not remove them until a few minutes before the ship is ready to launch. Indeed, whatever information he's received may justify that course of action. Yet she has to gamble on his unwillingness to be officially reprimanded by someone farther up the chain of command.

"All right," Reese says, "we'll play it your way." He turns to his men. "Boone, Schmidt, remain here. Carruthers, Lucchesi, go over to the other hatch. Stay at arm's length from anyone coming aboard, and don't leave this deck unless I give a direct order." The soldiers salute him as they move into position, and Reese looks back at Dana. "Okay?"

"Yes, sir, it is. Thanks for your cooperation." Reese gives her a perfunctory nod and pushes himself over to join Boone and Schmidt by the airlock.

A minute passes, then the inner hatch cycles open again; a figure wearing an isolation suit pushes himself through. He's already removed his helmet: Tom Shapiro, the *Alabama*'s First Officer. Tom grins when he sees Dana, but his expression changes when he sees the soldiers.

"Welcome aboard, sir," Dana says. "Hope you had a good ride."

"We did, thanks." Tom's gaze moves across the troopers. Behind him, Jud Tinsley has already poked his head and shoulders through the hatch; his eyes widen as he catches sight of the soldiers. "What's this, an honor guard?"

"I think we should take it that way." Dana stares him square in the eye. "Apparently Colonel Reese here has just received word that there's someone wants to sabotage the launch."

"Really?" The First Officer turns to Reese. "Colonel, would you like to explain what you're doing aboard my ship?" Before he can answer, Shapiro raises his hand to Tinsley. "Hold the line, Jud. We've got a problem."

The Executive Officer nods and remains where he is, half-in and half-out of the hatch. It's Reese's turn to look uncomfortable: now that he's aboard the *Alabama*, Shapiro outranks him. "My apologies, sir," Reese says, giving

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Shapiro an untidy salute. "We've received word from the ground that the ISA have arrested some D.I.'s who they believe are linked to a plot to sabotage this mission."

"Really?" Shapiro frowns. "And how do they intend to do that?"

Reese hesitates. "We're . . . I mean, they're not certain, sir. It seems that they may try to smuggle someone aboard this ship. Possibly more than one person."

"And you've been sent to make sure no one gets aboard." The colonel nods, and Tom slowly shakes his head. "I respect your concern, Colonel, but I find that highly unlikely. When I left GSC only ninety minutes ago, it was under strict lockdown . . . just as this ship is supposed to be." He glares at Dana. "Why have you let these people aboard, Chief?"

"Sorry, sir. I was trying to accommodate the Colonel."

"Well, keep 'em here. I don't want to scrub the launch just because we have to sterilize the ship again." Then he looks back at Tinsley. "Jud, tell everyone behind you to put their helmets back on. They can take 'em off once they're through this compartment."

"Aye, sir." The XO disappears from the hatchway.

"Pain in the ass," Shapiro mutters angrily as he pushes himself toward the access shaft. "Sorry if I don't shake your hand, Colonel, but I don't want to catch whatever it is you're carrying." He pauses by the ceiling hatch. "I know you're just doing your job, and I appreciate it. But don't touch my people, okay?"

"Yes, sir." Again, Reese salutes him. "Sorry."

"Very good. Carry on." Shapiro returns the salute, then looks back at Dana. "Chief. . . ?"

"Yes, sir." Dana lets Tom lead her through the manhole leading upward into the ship. Once they're out of earshot, she taps his ankle. "Nice catch," she whispers.

"We're not out of it yet." Shapiro glances up and down the shaft to make sure they're not being overheard. "Get in touch with the skipper, let him know what's going on."

Dana glances at her watch: 1229 EST. "Too late," she murmurs. "They're on their way."

Merritt Island 7.5.70 / T-11.31.43

The roadsides along the causeway crossing the Banana River are jammed with coupes and midis of every make and color; tens of thousands of people have crowded themselves onto the narrow sandbars linking the bridges. Tents are scattered all across the narrow beaches, and the aroma of hamburgers and hot dogs rising from barbecue braziers mixes with the salt breeze.

Unimpeded by traffic, the government maxvee cruises straight down the causeway, the swirling red and blue lights on its roof rack clearing the way. The driver ignores the bystanders who stare curiously at the vehicle as it sweeps past them. In the back of the max, though, no one can see any of this. Crammed together on the hard plastic benches, they silently stare at one another, beads of sweat rolling down their faces. Most of their perspiration comes from the stifling heat within the vehicle, but Jorge can't help but wonder if much of it is due to fear.

Everyone's suddenly jostled as the maxvee begins to slow down. The

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nameless prefect at the back of the van cups his hand over his earpiece. "Okay, we're coming up on the checkpoint," he says loudly. "Everyone, helmets on. People with children, lean forward a little to hide them. No matter what happens, don't say anything. Just keep your mouths shut." He reaches beneath his seat, picks up his uniform cap. "Don't worry. It'll all be over and done with in a minute."

Jorge glances at Rita and the kids one last time, then pulls the loose hood over his head. Now he perceives the world only through a curved pane of transparent plastic; every time he exhales, the bottom of the faceplate fogs up. Next to Rita, Marie begins to protest—"Mama, I can't breathe!"—until her mother quickly shushes her. Beside him, Carlos sits up a little straighter, trying to make himself look more like an adult. With his hood on, he could almost pass for a grown-up, but Jorge isn't taking any chances; as the vehicle glides to a halt, he gently pushes his son back against the bench, then he moves forward on his hips to hide him as best as he can.

Time passes. How long, Jorge can't tell; perhaps it's only a minute, but it seems much longer. Muffled voices from the front, but he can't make out any words. The driver talking with the guard at the gatehouse, showing him his I.D. Something that sounds like laughter. Then, all of a sudden, the rear hatch opens, and he squints against the midday sun to see an armed soldier staring at them.

"What the hell are you doing?" The prefect stands up, blocks the hatch. "Shut the door, you idiot! These people are in quarantine!"

The soldier stares back at him, then he hastily reaches up to close the hatch. Jorge lets out his breath as it bangs shut, briefly closes his eyes in a silent prayer of thanks. A few people around him start to murmur, but the prefect hastily gestures for everyone to remain quiet. A few seconds pass, then they're thrown against each other once more as the max surges forward again.

"Okay, they bought it." The prefect looks as relieved as anyone else. "We're in."

Cheers ring through the vehicle; all around him, people start to remove their helmets. "Keep 'em on!" Henry shouts. "We'll be there in just a couple of minutes."

Jorge reluctantly leaves his helmet in place. The cover story worked: the people in the maxvee are members of the back-up crew, being brought in at the last minute from a remote location just in case the *Wallace* suffers a catastrophic launch failure.

Minutes pass, then the maxvee downshifts again. It makes an abrupt turn to the right, slows to a crawl, then coasts to a stop. People shift nervously in their seats, but the prefect holds up his hand, silently gesturing for everyone to remain where they are. One hand cupped over his earpiece, he keeps an eye on his watch, as if waiting for something. Another minute goes by, then he looks up at them.

"Okay, we're ready," he says. "Remember, do just as you were told. Don't stop for anything, don't talk to anyone. Just keep moving."

The rear hatch opens; just outside are two men in white FSA coveralls. They quickly lower the ramp, then urgently motion everyone to get out. The passengers rise, start shuffling down the ramp. Jorge picks up his bag, pulls it over his right shoulder, glances over his shoulder to make sure his family is with him. Carlos is directly behind him, leading Marie by the hand, with Rita bringing up the rear.

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Their vehicle is stopped in a garage. Another max, this one painted white with FSA markings, is parked nearby, yet the area is vacant save for the two workmen helping them out of the max and a third standing at the top of a short flight of steps leading to a closed metal door. "Hurry up, hurry up," the prefect snaps. "C'mon, folks, we're running out of time! Go, go, go. . . !"

Now they're heading up the steps to the landing where the third workman is waiting for them. The prefect trots past them to the front of the line; a quick look back, then he nods to the workman. He swings opens the door and steps aside to hold it open, and the prefect ushers them into a narrow corridor.

A lone figure wearing an isolation suit comes out of a doorway halfway down the hall. He and the prefect exchange a hand-signal, then the prefect steps away, holding open the door and motioning for everyone to follow the man he's just met. "Keep going, keep going," he says quietly as they file past him. "Don't stop, just keep going. . . ."

Another short corridor, then a left turn through the double doors of an airlock. Jorge passes through the door, finds himself in a long room lined with chairs and tables. A thin yellowish haze hangs in the air, floating a couple of feet above the tile floor, yet that isn't what he notices first.

Throughout the room, men, women, and children dressed in isolation suits are sprawled everywhere: lying across tables, collapsed in chairs, fallen face-down on the floor. None of them wear helmets.

They were gassed, Jorge realizes with horror. Whatever was introduced into the quarantine facility's air system knocked these people down so quickly, they didn't have a chance to reach their helmets lying nearby. The *Alabama*'s colonization team: fifty URS officers and their families, bowled over within seconds. Jorge sincerely hopes they're not dead. They're so still, it's hard to tell . . . but no, they're still breathing; he can see their chests moving, their eyelids twitching ever so slightly.

The figure at the head of the line turns, makes a hasty gesture: *come on, come on, don't stop, keep moving!* Jorge follows the procession down the center aisle. His faceplate fogs up and he feels light-headed; he has an impulse to drop the bag, turn around and run for the door. Too late. For the sake of his wife and children, he has to keep going. . . .

At the far end of the room is a second airlock. The figure at the head of the line stops to twist open the lockwheel, then quickly gestures for someone behind him to grab a chair and prop it open. Caught by a draft of fresh air moving between the two open doors, the yellow haze drifts toward the second hatch. The line starts moving again, heading toward the exit.

Another short corridor, this one leading to a new pair of double-doors. A URS soldier lies face-down just inside the doors. Someone stunned him while he was standing guard. The leader gets someone else behind him to take care of the sentry; he grabs the soldier under his shoulders, drags him back into the quarantine room. Their leader waits until the soldier has been taken away and the volunteer has returned; another quick look to make sure that everyone is with him, then he turns and opens the door.

Raw sunlight, hot and blinding, floods the corridor, and now they're walking into it, a procession of anonymous figures in isolation suits. Beyond the door, upraised voices, the staccato clicking of camera shutters, loud applause . . .

And now they're striding single-file past a dense crowd of journalists and cameramen, all gathered behind a red velvet rope to bear witness as the *Alabama*'s colonization team emerges from the Crew Training Facility.

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Everything seems so surreal, as if he's walking through a weird dream, yet Jorge feels his fear suddenly leave him, replaced by a strange dissonance. Somehow, it seems to him that this is the way it should be, the way it was meant to be. On the other side of those lenses are hundreds of millions of eyes, watching as he begins his journey to the future. Still remaining in step with the man just in front of him, he can't help himself . . .

Jorge raises his hand to wave goodbye, and the mob straining against the rope roars its approval. Then microphones and cameras are shoved toward him, and he remembers who he really is, what he's doing. Jorge feels his knees become weak; he drops his arm and looks away, deliberately focusing on the white maxvee parked only a few yards away.

A soldier stands in front of the max, and standing next to him is the prefect who had helped them get this far. He glares at Jorge as he steps onto the ramp. Embarrassed, Jorge doesn't dare meet his angry gaze as he boards the vehicle.

He takes a seat on the bench, moves over a little to make room for Carlos. Through the faceplate, he catches a brief glimpse of his son's face—*Papa, you moron!*—then he takes the bag and shoves it beneath his legs as Marie and Rita sit down next to them.

The last person aboard is the man who met them outside the quarantine facility. He turns to wave to the press, then takes a seat at the back of the vehicle. The prefect turns his back to them as a soldier pushes the ramp back in place. The rear hatch slams shut; a few seconds later, the maxvee rises from its pads and starts to glide away.

The man who led them through the CTF ducks his head, pulls off his helmet. When he looks up at them, his eyes are cold and hard.

"Gentlemen, ladies," he says quietly, "I'm Captain Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the *Alabama*. From this moment on, you'll do exactly what I tell you to do. . . ."

Merritt Island 7.5.70 / T-11.10.52

Fifty years ago, Pad 11 was Shuttle Launch Complex 39-B, the point of departure for NASA's first-generation space shuttles. The enormous launch tower and service structure, however, have long since been dismantled to make room for single-stage orbital transports that require none of the old hardware. Virtually the only things that remain from the former site are the high security fence that encircles the base of the mound, and the broad concrete road leading across the surrounding marshlands to the pad.

The URSS *George Wallace* rests on its tricycle landing gear, tended to by a half-dozen pad technicians who now wait near the gangway lowered from beneath the spaceplane's fuselage. Wisps of supercooled hydrogen drift from the blowoff vents of the transport's nuclear indigenous fuel engines, curl upward around the raked edges of its twin vertical stabilizers. The pad crew watches as the maxvee, escorted by a pair of security HVs, passes through the fence gate and glides to the top of the mound.

The max comes to a halt, and two workers open the rear hatch and pull down the ramp. Captain Lee is the first to emerge; peering through his helmet, he takes a moment to gaze at the *Wallace,* then he turns to salute the pad crew gathered nearby. They grin and break into applause; he stands

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aside and watches as the colonization team disembarks from the maxvee and marches toward the shuttle.

Most of the passengers have already trooped up the gangway when Lee notices a couple of pad workers looking away from the spacecraft. He turns to see a black coupe gliding down the service road from the distant launch control center. The security officers walk over to meet the car as it moves through the gate and up the hill. It comes to a halt next to the maxvee, then its doors slide open.

Lee feels a twinge of unease when he sees the prefect who shepherded the D.I.'s from southern Georgia; there's no reason why he should be here now. When Roland Shaw climbs out of the car, something clutches at the back of his throat; despite the heat of the day, the DIS is wearing his uniform grey overcoat and cap. Yet Lee's unprepared for the woman in the hooded travel cape who gets out of the back of the coupe. For a few moments he doesn't recognize her, then she comes closer and lowers her hood, and he finds himself gazing upon the face of the last person he ever expected to see again: Elise Rochelle Lee.

Lee's still staring at Elise as Shaw and the prefect approach him. "Captain Lee," Shaw says quietly, "my apologies, but there's a matter of utmost importance we need to discuss with you."

"I . . . I don't understand." Lee's mouth is dry. "Is there a problem?"

A grim smile appears on his former wife's face, yet Elise remains quiet, her hands clasped together within her cape. "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid there is," the prefect replies. "We have to speak with you immediately."

The security officers step closer, their hands never far from their holstered sidearms. Confused, the pad techs hover nearby, murmuring to one another. The last handful of men and women boarding the *Wallace* watch from the bottom of the gangway; Lee can't see their faces, but he knows that they must be frightened. "Yes, of course. By all means. What is it that you want?"

Elise opens her mouth as if to say something, but she's cut off by Shaw. "Perhaps we should do this in private." He gestures to the max. "In there?"

Lee nods within his helmet, and the prefect turns to lead them up the ramp into the back of the vehicle, signaling for the two security officers to shut the hatch behind them. Once they're alone, Shaw looks at Lee. "Would you take off your helmet, sir? I think we've minimized the risk of contamination, and it would make this conversation easier."

Lee reluctantly removes his helmet. His hair is soaked with sweat; he pushes it with his gloved hand as he steps back, trying to keep the others at arm's distance. "If this is supposed to be a last-minute send-off, your timing is . . ."

"Sorry, Captain, but it's a little more serious than that." Shaw glances at Elise. "Your wife . . ."

"Former wife," Elise interrupts. "For the record, we're married in name only."

"We're not on the record, but I'll try to remember that." Shaw's eyes never leave Lee's. "Ms. Lee has alerted the ISA to a . . . well, certain improper actions on your part. She claims she's found a letter. . . ."

"You know the one I'm talking about, don't you?" Elise indicts him with her gaze. "The letter you left in your desk, the one which I wasn't supposed to find until after the *Alabama* launched. . . ."

"The one I addressed to you and your father, yes." Lee slowly lets out his

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breath. "My mistake. I thought you'd wait until I was gone before you decrypted the password to see what I might have left behind." He can't help but smile. "No bank codes, sorry. I left everything to charity."

Her face darkens. "After all my father's done for you. . . ."

"The senator did nothing for me. It was all for himself. Maybe for the Republic, too, but that's almost as low." Despite his fear, Lee gives her a defiant smile. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't give a damn about the Republic or your father."

Elise's eyes widen. A confession is the last thing she expected. Indeed, Lee is shocked by his own words. Yet if they've read the letter, they already know everything; denying it now would be pointless. Shaw steps a little closer, his right hand moving to the front of his coat. "Then you admit you're involved in a plot to hijack the *Alabama*, that you're planning to smuggle D.I.s aboard. . . ?"

"Absolutely. Everything in my letter, it's all true." Lee barely glances at Shaw. "In fact, they're already aboard the shuttle." Although he speaks to the DIS, he continues to stare straight at Elise. "And so you'll know, I'm not just involved in this . . . it's my plan, has been from the very beginning."

Elise's mouth falls open; she recoils as if he's slapped her. "How. . . ? When did. . . ?"

"From the moment I was selected as mission commander." Lee savors her horror, even as from the corner of his eye he sees Roland Shaw slowly draw a stunner from within his coat. "Perhaps even before then. Maybe I got the idea even while I was in the Academy and saw what was being done to Project Starflight. Or maybe it was while we were married, and I got to watch from close range while your father and his cronies ruined the country. In any case, I've had a long time to learn to hate the Republic . . . and you too, for that matter."

Elise can't speak. Lee isn't surprised; for the first time, at least in his memory, someone close to her has uttered seditious thoughts about the government. Now he knows for certain that she never suspected what he was planning, even during the years that they shared the same bed. More evidence of the fact that their marriage was a sham. "But I have to thank you for one thing," he continues. "Your father's connections enabled me to establish a few of my own. Through him, I met some people without whom none of this would have been possible."

Then he looks at Shaw. "Are we all set?"

"Yes, Captain, we are." The Director of Internal Security nods his head. "Just one last detail. . . ."

Elise turns to stare at Shaw. "What. . . ?"

Shaw squeezes the trigger. There's a soft *thufft* of compressed air, then Elise collapses as the charged dart strikes her. She almost falls against the side of the van, but the prefect grabs her by the shoulders, gently lowers the unconscious woman onto a bench.

Lee lets out his breath. "Bad luck," he says quietly. On the one hand, he's glad Shaw used a nonlethal weapon; as much as he despises this woman, he has no desire to see her dead. On the other hand, she knows too much. "What are you going to do with her?"

"We can keep her down for a couple of hours, at least." Shaw tucks the stunner back in his shoulder holster. "By the time she wakes up, she'll be in Valdosta, awaiting trial on sedition charges. Don't worry, we'll find a way to make 'em stick, father or no father. But we've still got a problem. . . ."

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"Let me guess. She told someone else at ISA."

"Uh-uh . . . fortunately she called me first. I heard from her just after our briefing, and by then she was already flying down here. She wanted to confront you personally, and I told her to keep it to herself." Shaw glances warily at the closed hatch of the van. "But some of your people were arrested earlier this morning, apparently while trying to make it to the rendezvous point. One of them cracked under interrogation and my people tipped off Highgate, and now there's a service squad on your ship, checking everyone who comes aboard. Sorry, Robert, but I didn't learn about it until right after I got the call from your wife. . . ."

"Please don't call her my wife." Lee picks up his helmet, juggles it in his hands. "And you can't order the squad to leave without raising suspicions, right?" Shaw shakes his head. "Okay. I'll deal with it somehow. At least cover for us until we lift off."

"That, I can do." Shaw looks at the prefect. "Ms. Lee is under arrest. Keep her sedated, and don't let anyone see her when she wakes up. I'll deal with this later." Then he takes Lee by the arm, leads him toward the hatch. "You've just had a long, tearful farewell visit with your loving wife, and now you and I are going to walk out there. . . ."

Security officers and pad workers silently watch as the commanding officer of the *Alabama* and the Director of Internal Security emerge from the back of the max and quickly walk across the launch pad to the *Wallace*. The colonists have already boarded the shuttle; now only the captain needs to walk up the gangway.

One of the pad workers has a camera. He uses it to catch a final snapshot of the two men as they formally salute each other at the bottom of the shuttle gangway. Many years later, historians will study this picture, and wonder what final words were exchanged by the two greatest traitors the United Republic of America has ever known.

"Good luck, Captain," Shaw says quietly. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Thank you, sir." Lee holds the salute. "And good luck to you, too."

Shaw nods ever so slightly. "We'll both need it."

URSS *Wallace* 7.5.70 / T-11.00.00

Jorge winces as an awesome roar rips through the passenger compartment, accompanied by a prolonged shudder that seems to go straight to the roots of his teeth. Scowling against the overpowering sound and vibration, he can barely hear Marie's frightened scream above the engines, but he clamps his hand over his daughter's.

"It's okay," he murmurs even though he knows she can't hear him. "It's all right . . . It's okay . . . everything's going to be all right. . . ."

No windows back here in the passenger compartment, only two long rows of narrow acceleration couches; his only view is past the shoulders of the passengers seated in front of him, through the latticed bubble window of the forward cockpit. Jorge catches a final glimpse of flat Floridan landscape falling away, then cloudless sky fills the window, more blue and clear than any sky he's ever seen before.

The deck tilts backward, pushing him further into the foam padding of his couch. Jorge turns his head, gazes at his family strapped into the seats

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next to him. Rita's eyes are closed tight and Marie's face is screwed up in mortal terror, but Carlos wears a huge grin; all his fears have vanished, and now he relishes every moment of this. Jorge feels a surge of paternal pride. His son . . .

Then the main engines howl into life, and Jorge has only a moment to turn his head forward again before his body is slammed back. Weight descends upon his body; his lungs fight for every breath he takes. Marie isn't screaming anymore, but the nails of her small hand dig into his palm. He wants to say something to her, but he can't. The g-force is incredible. Henry, you bastard, you lied. . . .

The sky turns dark purple, starts fading to black.

URSS *Alabama* 7.5.70 / T-10.47.12

"Incoming OCN from the *Wallace,* sir. Captain Lee."

"Thank you, Mr. Gillis, I'll take it here." Shapiro rotates the command chair seat away from the status board, taps his headset. "*Wallace,* this is *Alabama,* do you copy?"

"We copy, *Alabama.*" Lee's voice comes clearly over the orbital communications network, the satellite system that permits spacecraft to radio one another without having to use ground-based systems. "Sorry for the delay, Tom. The ride up was a little bumpy, but we cleared the pad without any difficulties. LEO achieved and we're headed for Highgate rendezvous, ETA 1430."

Shapiro closes his eyes in relief. Good. Lee spoke of himself in the plural, which means he's managed to get everyone aboard the *Wallace*. The line about having a bumpy ride up, though, is a signal that not everything went well. "Sorry to hear that you picked up some chop, sir. Maybe I can narrow your ETA if you'll feed me your numbers on the GI."

"We copy, *Alabama*. Thanks, I'd appreciate it."

"Stand by, *Wallace*." Shapiro unbuckles the seat harness, pushes himself across the deck to the com station. Several other members of the bridge crew are gathered in the semi-circular compartment, but not all of them are involved; he has to be careful what he says and does. Les Gillis punches up the OCN graphic interface; glancing over his shoulder at Shapiro, the com officer briefly holds up three fingers, then lowers one. Shapiro nods, then taps his headset again. "Captain, we're patching the GI into OCN-3. I hope this isn't too much trouble."

A brief pause. "Roger that, *Alabama*," Lee says. "No, it's not too much trouble."

Shapiro and Gillis trade a knowing look: Lee understands the doubletalk. Although they're using OCN-3 to exchange data regarding orbital coordinates, at the same time they'd be patched into OCN-2, a seldom-used extra-low frequency band they've established for covert print-only communications. Although flight controllers in Houston may be monitoring OCN-3, they won't be looking for ELF transmissions carried over OCN-2. Or at least so they hope.

Leslie taps at his keyboard, and the small flatscreen in front of him divides in half. The top half depicts a global map of Earth's surface, with the curved ground-tracks of Highgate and the *Wallace* projected above it. The shuttle is halfway through its first orbit, now passing through the night ter-

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minator somewhere above the Indian Ocean; meanwhile Highgate, in a higher orbit, is coming up on the northern California coast. Numbers to the right of the map display the exact coordinates of both spacecraft. All very routine. The bottom half of the screen, though, displays a decrypted ELF message from the *Wallace*:

ISA CAUGHT 5 HERE—1 TALKED—GSC SECURITY ALERT

Shapiro swears beneath his breath. If there was a security alert at the Cape, then Lee was lucky to get the *Wallace* off the ground. Feet dangling in midair, he leans across Gillis to type a response:

5 URS ABOARD WAITING FOR YOU—WEAR SUITS W/ HOODS

A long pause. Shapiro glances over his shoulder, spots Dana Monroe watching him from the engineering station. He cocks his head toward the screen; she nods, then pushes off to glide toward them. When he looks back, Lee's response has already appeared:

WILL DO—1ST OPTION OUT—GO TO OPT. 2

Gillis hisses between his teeth. "He can't be serious," he whispers, so low Shapiro can barely hear him.

Tom feels a soft hand grip his shoulder. Looking around, he finds Dana behind him. Her eyes widen as she reads the screen. "Oh, God. . . ."

Shapiro twists around to examine the status board. All systems are in the green, and the final stage of the fuel load-up is almost complete. Through the windows on the other side of the deck, he can see the aft end of the fuel barge parked beneath the main tank. At 1400, forty-four minutes from now, the last few tons of the helium-3 and deuterium necessary for the primary boost phase will have been pumped aboard. Thirty minutes later, at 1430, the *Wallace* is scheduled to dock with the *Alabama*. After that . . .

"Can we do this?" Tom whispers. Dana hesitates, gives a reluctant nod. "Okay," he murmurs, then he taps his headset again. "We've got your numbers, *Wallace,* and they look good to us. Concur with your projected ETA."

"We copy, *Alabama*," Lee replies. "*Wallace* out."

Shapiro sighs, then he looks at Gillis. "Tell the others to get ready . . . and for God's sake, do it quietly." The com officer is ashen, but he nods his head. Shapiro gives him a gentle pat on the back, then he turns again to Monroe. "Can you get us ready for a quick-start?"

"I . . . sure, no problem. We'll be there." Shapiro starts to push away, but she stops him. "One thing . . . what about the lock-out?"

"I don't know," he mutters. "Better just hope the right man made it aboard."

URSS *Wallace* 7.5.70 / T-9:32:14

Gazing up through the canopy, Lee watches as the *Alabama* fills the cockpit windows. The shuttle cradle is only a few yards away; with deft movements of the hand controller, occasionally glancing down at the instrument panel to make sure the upper fuselage hatch is properly aligned with the docking collar, he gently coaxes the *Wallace* closer toward the enormous ship as the spaceplane's blunt shadow falls across its hull. The shrill beep of contact probe, and he relaxes his grip on the stick. Another moment passes, then the hard thump of the hatch mating with the collar.

"*Alabama*, we're in," he says. "Secure shuttle, please."

"Roger that, *Wallace*." Tom Shapiro's voice. "The XO's waiting for you.

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He'll help you bring your party aboard."

"Very good, *Alabama*, thank you." As he switches off the main systems he feels a soft jar pass through the shuttle as the cradle closes around the *Wallace* and locks it in place. Another quick look across the board to make sure the engines are safed and the wings have been properly folded, then Lee shrugs out of his harness, picks up his helmet, and pushes himself out of his seat and moves from the narrow cockpit into the aft passenger compartment.

A few of the hardier ones are already unbuckling their straps, but many remain in their seats, their faces queasy and pale. The air is rank with the odor of vomit; quite a few of these people got sick as soon as the *Wallace* entered orbit, and some didn't find the puke bags in time. Globular flecks of bile float through the compartment, but there's nothing that can be done about that now. Lee whistles sharply between his fingers, and everyone looks up at him.

"Okay, listen up," he says loudly once he has their attention. "You know what the situation is, so make sure your hoods are on when you leave the shuttle. Don't stop for anyone, just head straight for the hatch . . . we've got someone there to show you the way. Go straight up the ladder until you reach Deck H1, and follow First Officer Shapiro to your bunks. Is that clear?"

Murmurs of assent, a few wary nods. Lee scans the compartment, sees dozens of nervous faces. "Everyone just relax," he adds, doing his best to calm them. "You did fine on the ground. Play it the same way here, and we're home free. Now . . . is there a Jorge Montero aboard?"

A pause, then a hand rises from three rows back on the right: a middle-aged man, seated with a woman, a young girl, and a teenage boy. Lee tries not to show his relief; he wasn't one of those who was apprehended by the prefects. "Jorge, please follow me. We need you right away."

Jorge nods his head, then hastens to unbuckle his daughter's harness. Judging from her pale expression, she was one of those who got spacesick. His son stares back at Lee with incredulity, wide-eyed with the notion that they've been singled out. "Just you, sir," Lee quickly adds. "I'm sorry, but your family has to leave with everyone else."

Jorge hesitates. "Yes, sir. Of course." He looks at his wife and kids, murmurs something to them, then struggles with a canvas duffel bag he has stuffed beneath his seat. Lee moves forward to catch it before it hits another passenger in the back of the head.

"You brought it?" he quietly asks. Jorge nods again, and Lee looks past him toward his children. "I'm going to need your father for awhile, so I want you to follow your mother. She'll take you where you're supposed to go, okay?"

His wife gives her husband an uncertain glance, but his son has a broad grin. The little girl, though, has a frightened look on her face. "Is my Papa in trouble?" she asks uncertainly.

"Not at all, sweetie." Jorge gives her a smile. "Don't worry. I'll be back with you quick as a flash." He takes the bag from Lee, pulls its strap across his shoulders. "Ready. Let's go."

Behind them, the rest of the passengers are opening their harnesses, pulling on their helmets. These people have been through a lot in the last eighteen hours; he can only pray they can keep it up just a little while longer.

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"Good luck, everyone," he says, then he pushes himself to the ceiling hatch.

URSS *Alabama* 7.5.70 / T-9.28.04

The inner hatch hisses as it irises open, then Captain Lee pushes himself through it, the soles of his shoes nearly touching the faceplate of Jorge's helmet. Jorge tries to follow him through the manhole, but something pulls at him from behind. Looking back, he sees that his duffel bag has snagged on the edge of the hatch.

Cursing under his breath, Jorge yanks the bag free, hauls it over his shoulder as he scrambles the rest of the way through the hatch. A moment of disorientation—everyone seems to be standing on the walls—eclipsed by fear as he spots URS soldiers within the narrow compartment.

Say nothing, do nothing. Jorge pretends not to notice the troopers as Lee salutes a senior officer wearing a colonel's insignia. Past them, on the other side of the deck only a few yards away, a young man in an FSA jumpsuit floats near a ceiling hatch. He gives Jorge an impatient gesture, and he obediently moves toward him. . . .

"Hold it." Someone grabs at his bag, nearly pulling it off his shoulder. Jorge turns, sees one of the soldiers, his hand wrapped around its strap. His name strip reads Carruthers, and his eyes are suspicious. "What d'ya got in there?"

Jorge feels his heart pounding in his mouth. Past Carruthers, Captain Lee and the colonel—Reese, from the name on his uniform—turn to stare at him. "Nothing . . . I mean, it's just . . ."

"Open it." Carruthers releases the bag, but his hands fall upon his rifle.

Lee turns toward Reese. "Gill, this is unnecessary. We're already behind. . . ."

"Let my people do their job." Reese gives Carruthers a brief nod. "Open it for him."

One hand still on his weapon, Carruthers takes the bag from Jorge, lets it dangle in mid-air while he unzips its flap. He peers at its contents, then he looks up at Jorge. "Lemme guess . . . scientist, right?"

Jorge nods, unable to speak. "Yeah, okay. . . ." Carruthers zips the bag shut, looks back at his superior officer. "Safe."

Reese acknowledges his man with a small nod, and Carruthers returns the bag to Jorge. His pulse still hammering, Jorge pulls the bag back over his shoulder, moves toward the hatch. When he glances back, he sees that Captain Lee is behind him, and more passengers are emerging from the shuttle hatch. No one else is getting harassed.

Yet the third soldier . . . his right hand is raised, his index finger wagging a little. Jorge realizes that he's counting everyone who leaves the *Wallace*. Four, five, six . . .

What happens when he gets to forty-seven, and discovers that the crew roster is short by five?

The crewman near the access hatch silently urges him toward the ladder. Jorge grasps the bottom rung, pushes himself upward into the shaft. He looks back, sees Captain Lee coming up the ladder. "Get to the command deck," he whispers. "Next deck up. C'mon, *move!*"

Two crew members float unconscious on Deck H4, a man and a woman, their arms limp at their sides, their heads thrown back. A young woman

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hovering near the hatch aims a stunner straight at Jorge; he raises his hands, then Lee appears behind him. "Stand down, Dana," he says calmly. "He's with us." Dana lowers the weapon as the captain glances at the crewmen. "Is this everyone?"

"On this deck, yes sir. Our people are taking care of the rest now. Some resistance in H3. Someone tried to shut down the life-support system, but they've been taken down. No casualties reported."

"Well done, Chief." Lee turns to another officer, points to the unconscious crewmen. "Put them where they won't cause any trouble when they wake up. The nearest head should do." Then he looks back at Dana. "Here's our man. He knows what needs to be done."

"Aye, skipper." She tucks the stunner in her belt, gestures to Jorge. "This way . . . what's your name?"

"Jorge. Jorge Montero." He grabs the ceiling rail, follows Dana across the deck to the main control console. "Electrical systems engineer . . . I designed the wiring for this place, when I was with . . ."

"Right. The service panel you want is down here." She lowers herself to the floor, thrusts her head and shoulders beneath the console. "You know where you're supposed to go?"

Jorge quickly scans the complex array of buttons, toggle switches and digital readouts until he finds a key slot covered with a transparent plastic cover. "Uh-huh. Main engine ignition system's here, which means the lock-out should be just beneath. . . ."

"Don't explain it to me. Just do it." Dana unlatches the service panel, impatiently shoves the cover aside. She pulls herself out from beneath the console, nods toward the open bay. "Whatever it is, make it quick."

"I know. Hold this." Jorge thrusts the duffel bag into Dana's arm. He pulls open the zipper, then begins pulling out its contents. Her eyes widen as books, many of them dating from the last century, spill forth from the bag: *Skills For Taming The Wilderness, The Foxfire Book, Survival With Style, Bartlett's Famous Quotations* . . . .

"What did you do, bring a library?" Dana snatches a frayed oversize paperback before it floats away, glances at the title: *The Boy Scout Handbook*.

Jorge grins despite himself. "Sort of. I picked some things I thought we'd need when we . . . here we are!" The hardcover copy of J. Brownowski's *The Ascent of Man* is nearly a century old; it took years of searching before he discovered a copy in an antiquarian bookstore outside Atlanta. Jorge opens the book to the back cover. "Got a knife? Something sharp?"

Dana reaches into a thigh pocket, pulls out a small penknife. Jorge takes it from her, opens its small blade, carefully slices the endpaper straight down the center of the inside binding. She watches in fascination as Jorge slowly peels back the false endpaper glued over the back cover, revealing a hidden pocket. Concealed within the book is a paper-thin plastic sheet: a fiberoptic circuit board. Dana smiles at Jorge with newfound respect. "Sneaky. Very sneaky."

"Figured someone might search me. It never came to that, but . . ." Withdrawing the circuit board from the pocket, Jorge gingerly holds it by its edges as he bends down to the open service panel. "Okay, look in there and find the electronics bay marked 2-304."

Dana pulls out a penlight, squeezes in past Jorge. After a few moments, she slides out a slender metal case. "Take out the board that's in there," Jorge says, and she removes the thin sheet contained within the drawer. As

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Jorge delicately places the substitute board within the drawer, he hears voices from across the compartment:

"Captain! Chief Tinsley reports Reese's men have discovered we're short!"

"Where's Tinsley now?"

"Access shaft just outside H5!" A pause. "He's shut the hatch, sir. The last of the passengers are aboard."

"Good. Tell the XO to stand by. Chief Monroe, where are we?"

Jorge slides the drawer shut, twists around within the cramped space to give the Dana a thumbs-up. She raises her head above the console. "We're clear, skipper!" Then she looks back down at Jorge. "I hope this works," she whispers.

"You and me both." Ten months of effort went into devising a bypass for the main engine ignition system that would not require code authorization from the ground, yet there was no certain way of testing it before now. Jorge barely has time to climb out from the console before Captain Lee pushes him out of the way. He's already removed his isolation suit, and now he yanks the chrome launch key from around his neck. Without any hesitation, Lee flips open the cover above the ignition system, shoves the key into the slot, gives it a one-quarter turn.

For a half-second, nothing happens; Jorge feels his heart skip a beat. Then diodes across the console flash from red to green, and a flatscreen in the center of the console lightens to display bars of alphanumeric code. Dana glances at the screen, then quickly types an instruction into a nearby keyboard. The screen changes, displaying a schematic of *Alabama*'s fusion reactor.

"Lock-out is down!" she shouts. "We've got the ship!"

Everyone in the command center yells at once, and Jorge feels the strength leave his body; gasping for breath, he lets his head fall back. It worked . . . oh, God, it worked . . . then, through the laughter and applause, he hears a voice from the other side of the command deck:

"Skipper! Message from Launch Operations . . . !"

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"They've ordered us to open the hatch!"

Holding onto a ceiling rail, Lee stares at the launch key half-turned in its slot. For a few seconds, everything seems frozen in time, Gillis's voice a distant echo from across a vast chasm. At the edge of his vision he sees Dana just beginning to react; next to her, Jorge Montero turns toward them, fear beginning to register on his face. . . .

It's got to be now, he realizes. Now, or never.

"Inform Ops we've got a ship emergency." Lee snaps back to full awareness. "Tell 'em . . . whatever. An electrical fire somewhere in the hub. Buy us some time." He glances at the chronometer above the console, then turns to Dana. "Put everything on line, Chief. We launch in five."

Dana's expression changes to astonishment. For a moment it seems she's about to protest, then she quickly nods her head. "Right away, sir," she says, then she pitches herself across the deck to the engineering station. "Paine! Jessup! Pressurize liquid fuel tanks, initiate primary ignition sequence! We're restarting the clock at minus-oh-five!"

The bridge crew stares at them, not quite believing what they've just

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heard. "Let's go, people!" Lee yells. "You know what to do!" That's all it takes; suddenly, everyone is in motion, nearly colliding with each other as they rush for their stations. The only person who seems confused is Jorge Montero; still holding onto the console, he stares about the compartment in confusion, not knowing what to do.

"Mr. Montero, get out of here." Lee points to the hatch as he pushes himself toward the command chair. "Find your family and tell them to get ready." Montero nods dumbly, then heads for the access shaft. Lee taps his headset. "Mr. Shapiro, where are you?"

"Deck C3B, skipper." Lee can hear voices in the background. "What's going on?"

"We're moving up the countdown. Zero-five and counting. Get those people strapped down, then get back here." Without waiting for a response, Lee turns toward Gillis. "Les! Put me through to Colonel Reese!"

The com officer slaps buttons on his board; a moment later, Reese's angry voice comes through Lee's headset. "Captain, what are you. . . ?"

"Ship emergency, Colonel." Lee tries to keep an even tone. "A fire has broken loose in Deck H3, and we're working to contain it, but I have to ask that you and your men leave the *Alabama* at once. Use the EVA suits in the lockers. . . ."

"Lee, there's no fire. The master alarm hasn't gone off." Reese isn't buying it; Lee can tell from the sound of his voice. "Your exec lit out of here when we informed him that the head-count was short by five persons, and now he's sealed the hatch. Either you let us in, or we're going to have to shoot our way through."

Reese is bluffing. The access shaft hatch on Deck H5 is built to withstand a full-scale decompression accident, and the rounds from a URS flechette rifle are specifically designed not to be able to penetrate bulkheads. There's no way the soldiers can enter the shaft. "Colonel Reese," Lee says calmly, "please take your men off the ship within four minutes. That's an order."

"I've already got my orders." A long pause. "Lee . . . I know what you're planning to do. We can't allow this. Surrender yourselves now, and you might get out of this without . . ."

"Sorry, Colonel, we're way beyond that." No sense in keeping up the pretense; Reese has figured out the truth. "Four minutes, then you're stowaways. Your choice."

Lee has just clicked off when he hears Gillis again. "Skipper, I've got Houston. They . . ."

"Mr. Gillis . . ." He takes a deep breath. "You have my permission to tell them to go straight to hell."

"Yes, *sir!*"

"Secondary engines pressurized, ignition systems armed." From her station, Dana keeps up a steady drone as she moves down the checklist. Lee absently gnaws at a knuckle as he watches her people flip switches, enter commands in their keyboards. "Main engine reactor on standby . . . navigation interface, checked and ready. . . ."

"You're sure you're ready to do this?" Tom Shapiro has returned to the command deck without Lee noticing; he rests his hand on the captain's shoulder. "Another ten minutes . . ."

"Another ten minutes, and they may find a way to stop us." Lee shakes his head. "We get out now, and they can't do anything. We'll complete flight procedures once we're underway." He looks up at Shapiro. "Agreed?"

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The First Officer hesitates, slowly lets out his breath. "Yes, sir. Understood."

"Are the passengers strapped down?" Shapiro nods reluctantly, and Lee points to the vacant seat at the main console. "Okay, take the helm. You'll have to fly until we've had a talk with Mr. McDowell."

Shapiro doesn't immediately obey his order; instead he lingers by the command chair, gazing through the windows at the dry-dock surrounding them. Lee looks up at him; for a moment neither man says anything. Shapiro waits for an answer to his unspoken question, when he doesn't receive one, he lets out his breath, then he moves to the helm, straps himself in, punches commands into his keyboard. "Main nav systems online," he murmurs. "Primary AI interface, green for go. . . ."

Now Lee's all alone. Voices in his headset ask questions; he answers yes or no, never once removing his gaze from the status board above the console. The last few minutes drift by. He rests his right elbow on the armrest, feels *Alabama* tremble beneath him: eighty thousand tons of metal, plastic, ceramic alloy, and flesh, waiting to be fired into the cosmos.

"Captain?" Gillis's voice is hesitant. "President Conroy online. He wants to speak with you."

Lee feels eyes upon him. Everyone waits for him to say something. A final denunciation? A curse upon the Republic? Perhaps haughty laughter from a trusted senior officer who has stolen the crowning achievement of a corrupt government and transformed it into an expression of freedom?

"Switch off the comlink, Mr. Gillis." Lee unfastens his seat belt, pushes himself over to the main console. "We're ready for launch."

Then he grasps the silver key, twists it the rest of the way to the right. A green light flares above it. "Disengage mooring lines," he says. "Fire main thrusters."

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Pyros silently ignite along the *Alabama*'s hull as the mooring cables are jettisoned, then the four maneuvering engines blaze to life and the starship slowly begins to move forward.

Ponderously, like a leviathan awakening within its grotto deep beneath the sea, the enormous vessel glides through the dry-dock, the red strobes of its running lights casting shadows along the trusswork of Highgate's central bay.

A service pod unlucky enough to be flying past *Alabama* at that moment turns on its axis, its RCRs flaring as it maneuvers wildly to avoid collision with the gaping maw of the ramscoop. Breath caught in his throat, the pilot watches through the cockpit as the five-hundred-foot length of the starship passes above him.

Within the EVA compartment, URS soldiers clutch the ceiling rails with both hands, their feet dangling in midair as they yell obscenities. A rifle skitters across a bulkhead, slams against the floor. Colonel Reese loses his grip, falls to the deck; there's a sharp pain in his left ankle as it twists; he ignores it as he tries to crawl toward the nearest suit locker. Yet he knows it's a futile effort; even if he were able to put on a suit and get to the airlock, *Alabama* is under thrust. Any attempt now to escape the ship would most certainly be fatal. Like it or not, he's going where it's going. . . .

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On Deck C4A, Jorge Montero lies prone on his bunk; weight descends upon him, pushing his body flat against the narrow mat. Within the cramped confines of the crew compartment, he can hear people cheering, laughing, sobbing with relief. Turning his head, he glances across the narrow aisle. Rita meets his gaze, then looks away. She's frightened: not of this, but of what lies before them.

"Goodbye, Earth!" From the bunk above him, Carlos yells against the dull creak of the bulkheads, the distant hollow thrum of the engines. "Goodbye, URS! We are history!"

Jorge grins. The kid's right. They've become history. . . .

Eyes half-shut, arms and legs relaxed, Captain Lee lets his body collapse against the soft membranes of his chair. All around him, he hears the low voices of the command crew as they murmur to one another; the quiet tapping of fingers against keyboards, the subdued chitter and occasional electronic beep of instruments. Studying the status board, he sees that all is well: *Alabama* is behaving just as it should, its complex systems all working well within their parameters.

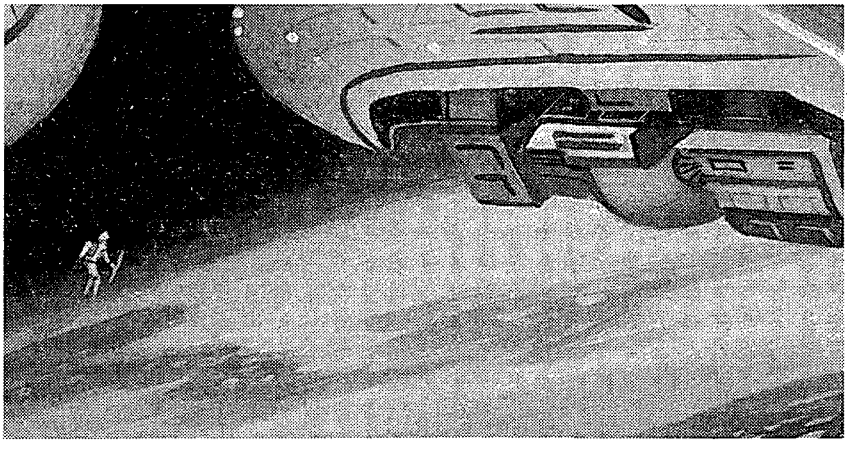
Everyone's going about their work with quiet stoicism, just as they were trained. Dana looks around at him, meets his eye; she gives him a smile, a silent thumbs-up. He returns the gesture, then shifts his gaze to the windows.

Highgate can no longer be seen. It's already many miles away, falling away behind him. In a couple of minutes he'll give the order for main engine ignition, the beginning of the three-month boost phase that will gradually accelerate the *Alabama* to cruise velocity. Long before then everyone aboard will be in hibernation; virtually immortal, they'll sleep for the next two and a quarter centuries, and when they awaken . . .

No. Now's not the time for this. Ursae Majoris 47 can wait a little while longer.

Lee watches as the silver-blue curvature of the Earth gracefully drifts past the command deck windows. No one says anything; the bridge team falls silent as they look upon their home world for the last time. For a moment, there is only the silence of the stars.

Peace. Liberty. Freedom. ❍



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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

CALCULATING GOD
by Robert J. Sawyer
Tor, $23.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-86713-1

Robert Sawyer seems to be intent on revisiting all the classic themes of science fiction, often with new twists that arise from a genuine rethinking of their premises. His latest is a good example: advanced aliens arrive on Earth (in Toronto, of course—Canadian content is a given in Sawyer's books). The basic idea goes back at least as far as H.G. Wells. But instead of seeking out our race's political leaders, the spider-like alien sets her lander down at a museum, asking to be taken to a paleontologist. This astonishes everyone—not least Thomas Jericho, the paleontologist on duty.

Jericho is not the only human so favored; other aliens have landed in other cities on Earth, each making contact with selected members of our species. Jericho learns that Hollus, his alien contact, is one of an expedition mounted by three intelligent species to search the universe for other lifeforms. And, as expected, the aliens have answers to many questions we of Earth have not yet solved. In particular, the existence of God is considered to be proven beyond the slightest doubt: no thinking creature doubts it.

Not surprisingly, this revelation throws the essentially atheist human scientists for a loop. It equally disconcerts the aliens to learn that educated humans still have doubts on the subject. But more troubling to Jericho is the news that other inhabited planets have experienced mass extinctions almost exactly synchronized with those that have occurred on Earth.

Jericho's entire training has convinced him that religion is irrelevant; the universe and everything in it can be explained by the operation of rational materialist principles. Even faced with the aliens' testimony, he cannot easily abandon his atheism. Yet, on a personal level, he is faced with an inevitable reminder of his own mortality in the form of a lung cancer diagnosis—for which alien medicine offers no more hope than human. The emotional flow of the book builds from the tension between his scientific convictions, his desperate future, and Hollus's unshakable religious faith.

Sawyer uses these tensions as a springboard for examining a number of issues entangled in our current debates on religion. Jericho and Hollus have long discussions of their different viewpoints—and on the way human religions diverge from those of the alien races. (Which differ among the various races—solid proof of God's existence doesn't mean uniformity of opinion concerning His nature or His demands of His creatures.)

While Jericho confronts these personal and philosophical issues, the novel is conjuring up fresh ones that make them look insignificant. One subplot follows a pair of religious fanatics engaged in terrorist bombings of institutions they see as threatening their true doctrine. A worse threat comes from an astronomical discovery that makes it

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clear that the Galaxy-wide wave of mass extinctions reported by Hollus is about to continue. And at last a sort of solution to Jericho's immediate problems presents itself—but it requires him to abandon everything he holds dear in life.

Sawyer brings the novel to an appropriate and unclichéd conclusion that manages to suggest resolutions of the big issues it explores without falling into the vague mysticism such explorations often elicit. Another solid effort by a writer whose willingness to give us new takes on the central questions of SF make him a valuable barometer of the genre's health as we begin the century.

WHEN THE KING COMES HOME
by Caroline Stevermer
Tor, $22.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-87214-3

If you're looking for a fantasy novel that combines classic themes with a fresh voice and approach, here's one that delivers the goods.

Hail is the daughter of a sheep-farmer's family, a girl whose ability to sketch a portrait convinces her parents to send her to Madame Carriera, an artist with a studio in the capital city, Aravis. Here, she undergoes a typical apprenticeship, doing such menial tasks as preparing paints and cleaning brushes, while serving as target for the jibes and practical jokes of older apprentices. Along the way, Madame Carriera passes on bits of her knowledge, and it appears that Hail is well on track toward becoming an artist in her own right.

To this point, the focus of the story is on well-drawn characters in an interesting society. (The setting is a sort of pocket reality within our own history, essentially a late renaissance Italian city fleshed out with references to real places and things beyond its borders.) In the course of her studies, Hail becomes fascinated by the work of a well-known artist of an earlier era, Maspero. Against Madame Carriera's explicit orders, she duplicates one of Maspero's most famous works, a medal showing King Julian IV, who died unexpectedly after negotiating a peace treaty with Austria. When a rival threatens to have her arrested for counterfeiting, she strikes him down, then flees the city headed for home. Then, a few days into her flight, she meets a man—the exact image of King Julian IV.

The apparent return of the king—an event that has become a folk metaphor for the arrival of all wished-for things—precipitates a political crisis. The current king is childless, in advanced old age, and the crops are failing for the second straight year. The darkest forms of magic are clearly at play in the world, and suddenly Hail finds herself jerked out of her world of the concrete and tangible into one where the old legends have returned to walk the earth.

Stevermer tells Hail's story clearly and directly, in the protagonist's own voice. While the subject is less explicitly magical, the feeling of the book is quite similar to that of Le Guin's "Earthsea" books—especially in the plain, yet delicately nuanced style and the cool juxtaposition of the everyday and the extraordinary in the story. If Stevermer can write more in this vein, she has a fine career ahead of her.

THE BEST OF LESTER DEL REY
by Lester del Rey
with Introductions by
Terry Brooks and Frederik Pohl
Del Rey, $12.00 (tp)
ISBN: 0-345-43949-X

Nowadays, Del Rey is probably most familiar to SF readers as the name of a publishing house. But

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those who were reading SF before the name became a logo remember a story-teller, one of the best in the business. This collection, first printed in 1977, pretty much lives up to its title—although his novel *Nerves* belongs in any list of his best work. But during the forties, when Lester del Rey made his impact, short fiction was the heart of the genre.

"Helen O'Loy," del Rey's second published story, is a good example of his approach. Sold to John W. Campbell at *Astounding,* it takes the theme (already a cliché in 1938, when it was written) of robot as all-purpose household appliance and adds a touch of Pygmalion. The story moves from light satire to tongue in cheek to pathos with deft touches—if it all seems a bit obvious now, that's because so many authors in the generations since have taken del Rey's effects and refined them.

A similarly pioneering story is "The Coppersmith," from 1939. This classic *Unknown* fantasy portrays one of the last of the Wee Folk surviving in the modern world, and puts him to work as an auto mechanic—the raw material of many more recent urban fantasies. Del Rey frequently explored the tension between realism and the supernatural in his SF. The 1954 novella "For I Am a Jealous People" pulls a twist on the history of Western religion. What if the irascible God portrayed in the Old Testament were to withdraw His favor from the human race in favor of an alien species, and send them to take over our world?

Del Rey's impish sense of humor is visible in these stories, as well—although not always on the surface level. In "Superstition," a seemingly fairly straight-ahead space opera, the protagonists find a planet inhabited by telepathic mutants. Only a handful of readers are likely to notice that the characters' names are puns on those of the Futurians, a fabled New York fan club, and other SF figures of the thirties and forties.

Toward the end of his career, del Rey stopped writing fiction entirely. He became far more famous as the editor who discovered Terry Brooks, David Eddings, and Barbara Hambly, and who essentially created commercial fantasy as a genre. His excellence as a writer was overshadowed to the extent that there were audible grumblings in the crowd when, in 1991, he received SFWA's Grand Master award, and it did little to mute them when he chose to use his acceptance speech to excoriate the current state of the genre. These stories should help put the emphasis back where it belongs: on one of the most skillful and inventive writers in the history of our genre.

DARK MATTER: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora
Edited by Sheree R. Thomas
Warner, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-446-52583-9

Asked to list black SF/Fantasy writers, most fans would be hard pressed to think of even half a dozen names. This anthology is the first concerted attempt to correct that ignorance, not only with a selection of fiction (including some from figures few of us knew had done work in the field) but with a handful of useful critical essays as well.

Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler are here, of course, with both fiction and essays. So are Nalo Hopkinson, Steven Barnes, and Walter Mosley, who ought to figure on anyone's list of prominent black SF writers. But there are also strong pieces by Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed—which may surprise readers not widely familiar with their writing. The selections here make it clear just how deftly they incorporate techniques and tropes we think

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of as unique to genre SF into their work.

In fact, Sheree Thomas makes it clear that the techniques and tropes of SF and fantasy have had a strong appeal to black writers for over a century. There are several real eye-openers here: W.E.B. DuBois' 1920 story "The Comet," for example, or the excerpts from George S. Schuyler's novel *Black No More,* from 1931. Both make effective use of their SFnal premises to set up the sharp observations of the human species that the minority viewpoint often puts in especially clear perspective. Anyone familiar with the SF of that era will be hard-pressed to think of much better work from any of their white contemporaries.

Other stories are harder to classify. Thomas has cast her net widely, which on the whole is a good thing. In addition to such already-familiar names as Jewelle Gomez and Nalo Hopkinson, she has included the likes of jazz poet Anthony Joseph and law professor Derrick Bell. Many of these writers have no previous connection to the field, and may never have thought of the genre magazines as markets for their work—although that should change if this book reaches its audience.

But for every reader who welcomes the broadening of the talent pool, there will be another who wonders why some material with only a peripheral SF element is included. (No surprise there, as any veteran of the New Wave or Cyberpunk battles can testify.) And while some may lament the absence of favorite stories or authors—Mary Aldridge's Nebula finalist "The Adinkra Cloth" comes to mind—it is undeniably a good sign that there is already more strong work in the field than one book could include.

Readers who find some of the contents insufficiently SFnal should pay close attention to the critical essays that conclude the volume, in particular those by Samuel R. Delany and Walter Mosley. Writing on "Racism and Science Fiction," Delany points out that one way of combating racism is to encourage dialogue among the various parts of the SF community—which at its widest certainly includes the writers whose first SF appearance is in these pages. And in "Black to the Future," first printed in the New York *Times Magazine,* Mosley predicts an explosion of SF from the black community. If the contents of *Dark Matter* are a fair sample, that is likely to be an exciting development—and one that this reviewer will look forward to.

MAN OF TWO WORLDS: My Life in Science Fiction and Comics
by Julius Schwartz with Brian M. Thomsen
HarperEntertainment, $14.00 (tp)
ISBN: 0-38-081051-4

"Living legend" is one of those terms that gets thrown around far too indiscriminately. The memory span of SF fandom can be disconcertingly short, and anybody who's been in the field for more than a decade seems to qualify as an elder statesman. But Julie Schwartz is the Real Thing.

Born in the Bronx in 1915, Schwartz began reading SF in the late 1920s, when the genre was in effect being invented by Hugo Gernsback and his stable of authors. Schwartz quickly met others who shared his interests, and before long was one of the active group of New York area fans who wrote letters to the pulps, got together to talk about their favorite writers, and—in time—began to publish fanzines. Schwartz was in on the ground floor of fandom, and, in common with many of his friends of that era, soon parlayed his hobby into something more.

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Schwartz would have us believe that it was merely a case of being in the right place at the right time, and having the sense to recognize the opportunity. Having become friendly with a number of writers and editors, he realized that he was in a perfect position to act as a go-between—in short, to become one of the first agents specializing in SF. His client list soon included the likes of H.P. Lovecraft, Edmond Hamilton, and Stanley Weinbaum—and eventually younger writers such as Ray Bradbury, Alfred Bester, and Robert Bloch.

It was one of those clients, Alfred Bester, who led Schwartz into his second career, as one of the most successful comics editors of the "Silver Age"—the period from the mid-fifties to the early seventies. Once again, he was in the right place at the right time—working on Batman, Wonder Woman, Superman, and the other stars of the DC stable. But there was more than just luck involved. Schwartz drew on his knowledge of the old SF and adventure pulps for story ideas, such as the idea of bringing the stars of different comics together for adventures. He convinced his writer friends from the SF community to try their hands in another field—a task made easier by the drying up of the pulp magazine markets that had supported so many of them in an earlier age. And he developed a keen sense of how the comics medium worked.

Schwartz tells his story in a genial, conversational style, familiar to anyone who's ever had the pleasure of seeing him present his slide show talks on SF and comics history. There are anecdotes galore about the stars of both fields, including plenty of good-humored stories told on himself. And there are dozens of photos and other illustrations to convey the full flavor of his remarkable life and of the fascinating people who have been part of it. He is never reluctant to share the credit for his accomplishments, but the alert reader will quickly come to understand that he is being allowed to look over the shoulder of one of the real giants of the field—no, of *two* fields.

An absolutely delightful book, by one of the most unfailingly entertaining people in the business. Anyone with even the slightest interest in the early years of SF, comics, or fandom, owes it to himself to find a copy—and enjoy it.

PARASITE REX: Inside the Bizarre World of Nature's Most Dangerous Creatures
by Carl Zimmer
Free Press, $26.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-648-85638-7

Parasites have gotten the reputation of being a sort of devolved life form, fit only to hitch free rides at the expense of their evolutionary betters. Looked at more dispassionately, they are superbly adapted creatures that have evolved sophisticated strategies for living off their hosts.

Zimmer, a senior editor at *Discover* magazine, describes the parasites' lifestyles in detail vivid enough to give susceptible readers nightmares. His subjects cover an incredible range. The protozoan *Plasmodium* can fit inside a human red blood cell, where it is the causative agent of malaria; at the other end of the size spectrum are tapeworms, which can grow sixty feet long. All successful parasites develop elaborate ways to dodge the immune system, whether passively, by hiding in cysts or actively, as in some species that release tame viruses to decoy defenses from the actual threat.

More interestingly to SF writers, some parasites modify the behavior of their intermediate hosts. *Toxoplasma,* when it inhabits rats, turns

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off a panic mechanism triggered by the smell of cat urine, so the rats no longer instinctively avoid their feline hunters—the parasite's ultimate host. This sort of behavior, making the infected animals more likely to be eaten, has a profound effect on the balance of predator and prey species in the wild. Other parasites sterilize their prey, diverting energy from reproductive activity to the creation of food for the parasite. Again, the effects on population—and thus on the evolutionary fate of the species—can be profound.

To many readers, the real meat of the book will be its description of how parasites affect the human race. Zimmer usefully summarizes the long history of parasite-borne disease, from malaria to the Black Death. More recently, research has shown that rain forest Indians in Venezuela, commonly infested with intestinal parasites, are almost entirely free of asthma. Apparently, without parasites to repel, our immune system turns its attention to otherwise minor irritants such as dust mites and cat dander. As with so many other apparent advances, the cure for one disease may well be the cause of another.

Some memorable SF stories have made use of parasites and symbiotes, from Hal Clement's *Needle* to Jack Vance's *The Eyes of the Overworld*. As this book suggests, there is plenty more to the subject. Well worth a look, even if the subject matter makes you instinctively go "Eeeuww!" ○

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The Great Economy of the Saurian Mode (nt) ..... Jul 66
Pieczynski, Therese—
Eden (ss) ..... Jan 86
Pilkington, Ace G.—
Dog Stars (p) ..... May 101
Purdom, Tom—
Romance in Extended Time (nt) ... Mar 106
Sergeant Mother Glory (nt) ..... Oct/Nov 142
The Noise of Their Joye (nt) ..... May 102

Reed, Robert—
Father to the Man (na) ..... *Sep* *12*
The Prophet Ugly (nt) ..... Apr 18
Two Sams (ss) ..... May 94
When It Ends (ss) ..... Aug 50
Resnick, Mike—
Redchapel (nt) ..... Dec 8
The Elephants on Neptune (ss) ... May 34
Reynolds, Alastair—
Merlin's Gun (nt) ..... May 68
Roessner, Michaela (with Daniel Abraham, Sage Walker, and Walter Jon Williams)—
Tauromaquia (na) ..... Oct/Nov 176
Rogers, Bruce Holland—
The End Times (p) ..... Jun 135
Rusch, Kristine Kathryn—
Millennium Babies (nt) ..... Jan 8
Results (ss) ..... Mar 35

Sarafin, James—
Downriver (ss) ..... Feb 42

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Sheffield, Charles—
Nuremberg Joys (nt) ..... Mar 41
The Art of Fugue (ss) ..... Jun 90
Silverberg, Robert—
All That Is Solid Melts Into Air (ed) Jul 4
And You Were Worried About Y2K? (ed) ..... Jun 4
Greetings from the Past (ed) ..... Jan 4
Guest of Honor (ed) ..... Oct/Nov 4
Pleistocene Park (ed) ..... Sep 4
Six Degrees of Robert Silverberg (ed) ..... Feb 4
Smithereens (ed) ..... Mar 4
The Grand Masters (ed) ..... Dec 4
The Past Is in Front of Us (ed) .... Apr 4
The View Through Slow Glass (ed) May 4
Skeet, Michael (with Cory Doctorow)—
I Love Paree (nt) ..... Dec 60
Spinrad, Norman—
On Books: Preservation Hall (r) ... Apr 130
——— Working the Fringes (r) ... Oct/Nov 226
Stableford, Brian—
Regression (nt) ..... Apr 44
The Ladykiller, As Observed From a Safe Distance (ss) ..... Aug 62
Strauss, Erwin S.—
Conventional Calendar (a) ..... Jan 142
——— ..... Feb 142
——— ..... Mar 142
——— ..... Apr 142
——— ..... May 142
——— ..... Jun 142
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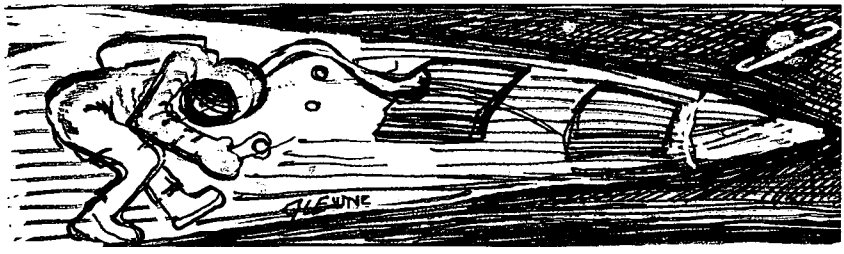
——— ..... Aug 142
——— ..... Sep 142
——— ..... Oct/Nov 238
——— ..... Dec 142
Sullivan, Tim—
Hawk on a Flagpole (nt) ..... Jul 84
Swanwick, Michael—
(with Eileen Gunn, Andy Duncan, and Pat Murphy)
Green Fire (na) ..... Apr 100
Swanwick, Michael—
Moon Dogs (ss) ..... Mar 54

Taylor, John Alfred—
Calamity of So Long Life (ss) ..... May 62
Tinkerbell is Dying (ss) ..... Sep 96
Tilton, Lois—
The Enclave (na) ..... Sep 100

Utley, Steven—
Background Music (p) ..... Aug 75
Chain of Life (nt) ..... Oct/Nov 122

Walker, Sage (with Daniel Abraham, Michaela Roessner, and Walter Jon Williams)—
Tauromaquia (na) ..... Oct/Nov 176
What, Leslie—
The Morning After (p) ..... Oct/Nov 141
Wheeler, Deborah—
Green Chains (ss) ..... Apr 36
Wilber, Rick—
Stephen to Cora to Joe, or, The Truth As I Know It, or, Shifty Paradigms: The Use of Literary Icons and Sports Motifs in Speculative Fiction (nt) ..... Jun 6
To Leuchars (na) ..... Sep 48
Williams, Liz—
Ancestors' Song (ss) ..... Oct/Nov 52
Williams, Sheila—
The 2000 Isaac Asimov Award (a) ..... Jul 10
Williams, Walter Jon (with Daniel Abraham, Michaela Roessner, and Sage Walker)—
Tauromaquia (na) ..... Oct/Nov 176
Williamson, Jack—
Question of Time (p) ..... Mar 136
Winter, Laurel—
Time Travel Verb Tenses (p) ..... May 93
Aunt Lily in Hyperspace (p) ..... Jul 16
Yolen, Jane (with Robert J. Harris)—
Requiem Antarctica (nt) ..... May 44



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FIFTEENTH ANNUAL READER'S AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) fifteenth year.

Please vote. Your ballot will be automatically entered in our drawing for a free one-year subscription. Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, cover artist, and interior artist you liked best in the year 2000. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp.137-139) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual *poem*, rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some cautions: Only material from 2000-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index.** No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 1, 2001,** and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, 11th Flr., New York, NY. 10016.** You can also vote via the Internet at **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**, but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We also hope to post ballots at our website, so please check us out at **www.asimovs.com.**

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so *every* vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for *your* favorite stories that goes uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference. So don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

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BEST NOVELLA:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST NOVELETTE:

1. _____
2. _____
3 _____

BEST SHORT STORY:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST POEM:

1. _____
2 _____
3 _____

BEST COVER ARTIST:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST:

1 _____
2. _____
3. _____

SIGNATURE: _____

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SF Conventional Calendar

We've still got one last big weekend to go, before the holiday lull sets in. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs and on how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 7102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message nd I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ut. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

NOVEMBER 2000

4–26—LosCon. For info, write: **11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601.** Or phone: **(818) 760–9234** (10 AM to 10 M, not collect). **loscon27@lasfs.org. www.lasfs.org/loscon27.** Con will be held in: Burbank CA (if city omitted, same as address) at the Airport Hilton. Guests will include: O. S. Card, Bob Eggleton, H. Knowles, C. Miller, G. Dazzo.

4–26—ConCat. (865) 523–6986. chloiea@mailexcite.com. Hyatt Regency, Knoxville TN. Charles de Lint, Charles Vess.

4–26—ChambanaCon. turkey@chambanacon.org. www.chambanacon.org. Clarion, Champaign IL. A. Offutt, W. Tucker.

4–26—UncommonCon. info@uncommoncon.com. www.uncommoncon.com. DFW Hyatt, Dallas TX.

4–26—Darkover. (202) 726–4396. www.darkover.com. Holiday Inn, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. For M. Z. Bradley's fans.

4–26—Trek Celebration. (913) 327–8735. sfedora1@aol.com. www.sfedora.com. Indianapolis IN. Commercial media event.

4–27—ConFiction. confiction@breathermail.net. Imperial Hotel, Blackpool UK. V. Hey, M. Sheard, D. Prowse. Media.

4–26—EsseKon. via@sf.hr. www.sf.hr/via/essekon/essekon. Osijek Croatia. "Gaia" awards.

5—Convencifoes Estelar. (+55–11) 296–3268. www.frotaestelar.com.br/toquemagia/. Sao Paulo, Brazil. Star Trek.

5–26—Creation. (818) 409–0960. www.creationent.com. Hofstra U., Hempstead NY. Commercial Hercules/Xena event.

0–Dec.3—Cruise for a Cure. junel.vero@wspan.com. Sovereign of the Seas, sailing from Cape Canaveral FL. Media.

DECEMBER 2000

-3—SMOFCon. (800) 206–2747. jsiclari@gate.net. Holiday Inn, Cocoa Beach FL. Where con organizers talk shop.

—Licence to Thrill. (0208) 523–1074. www.scifishows.com/licence. Posthouse, Basildon UK. Media.

0—Sci-Fi Show, Nelson House, 341 Lea Bridge Rd., London E10 7LA, UK. Contact as for con above. Watford UK. Media.

9–31—EveCon, 1607 Thomas Rd., Friendly MD 20744. www.fantek.org. Hilton, Tysons Corner VA (Washington DC).

9–Jan. 1—HogmanayCon, 26 Avon–bank Rd., Rutherglen, Glasgow G73 2PA, UK. www.hogmanaycon.org.

0–Jan. 3—NordCon, GKF, Box 76, Gdansk 37 80–325, Poland. (048 058)–553–1073. gkf@thenut.eti.pg.gda.pl. Clubs.

JANUARY 2001

-7—GAFilk, 3630 Salem Dr., Lithonia GA 30038. filk@mciworld.com. www.gafilk.org. Atlanta GA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

-7—Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109th #125, Overland Pk KS 66210. (913) 327–8735. www.sfedora.com.

2–14—Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq., Bldg. 600, #322, Cambridge MA 02139. moreinfo@arisia.org. Park Plaza, Boston MA. Bujold.

2–14—ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (770) 578–8461. www.chattacon.org. Clarion.

2–14—MarsCon, 429–7 Lester Rd., Newport News VA 23601. marscon@erols.com. Ramada Inn Historic, Williamsburg.

2–14—RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124. bobbied@microsoft.com. www.rustycon.com. Holiday Inn, Everett WA.

9–21—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. confusion@stilyagi.org. www.stilyagi.org/cons/confusion. Zettel.

AUGUST 2001

0–Sep. 3—Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006. Philadelphia PA. Bear, Dozois. WorldCon. $145.

AUGUST 2002

9–Sep. 2—ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. conjose@sfsfc.org. San Jose CA. WorldCon. $100.

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NEXT ISSUE

FEBRUARY COVER STORY

We're bringing you not one but two vivid and action-packed interstellar adventures in next month's issue, just the thing to help you shake off those early-winter-it-gets-dark-in-the-afternoon blues!

First, multiple Nebula and Hugo-winner **Larry Niven**, one of the giants of the field, joins forces with new writer **Brenda Cooper** (making her Asimov's debut) next month to give us ringside seats for a deadly game of cat-and-mouse across the frozen surface of an icy planet in a distant solar system, a game that spells certain death for the loser, a taut and suspenseful game of "Ice and Mirrors" that could very well determine the future of humanity. You won't want to miss this one!

Then acclaimed author **Eleanor Arnason**, winner of the James Tiptree Memorial Award, who showed up on both the final Hugo and Nebula ballots last year, treats us to another of her fast-paced and evocative stories detailing the adventures of interstellar location-scout Lydia Duluth. In this one, Lydia's visit to a political tinderbox of a planet turns out to be the spark that unleashes a firestorm of revolution, abduction, terrorism, and revenge, one that Lydia can escape only if she can find, and exploit, a very unlikely "Lifeline"—before it's too late.

But that's not all that we have waiting for you in February:

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Hugo-winner **Bruce Sterling** takes a wry and razor-sharp look at some lifestyles of a high-tech future, in "User-Centric"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** takes us to the distant reaches of the solar system, and into a scary, headlong, and potentially deadly adventure, as he regales us with a "Romance with Phobic Variations"; acclaimed writer **James Sallis** returns after a very long absence with a compelling story that will make you feel every sizzling degree of the "Day's Heat"; **Joel Richards** returns after another long absence to show us just why "The Gods Abandon Alcibiades"; and new writer **Daniel Abraham** shows us a kind of social "Exclusion" much stranger than being barred from joining the local country club.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines the intricacies of "Like If"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstand on December 19, 2000, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you the **rest** of the year!

COMING SOON

great new stories by **Nancy Kress**, **R. Garcia y Robertson**, **Kage Baker**, **Allen Steele**, **Robert Reed**, **S.N. Dyer**, **Andy Duncan**, and many others.

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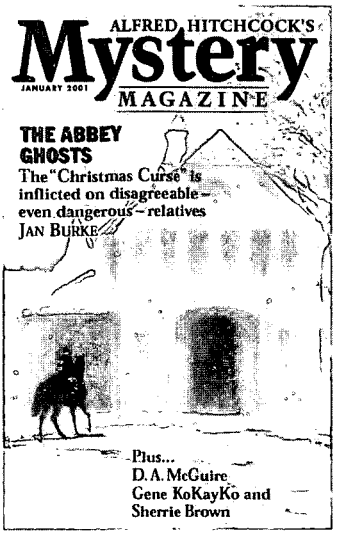

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